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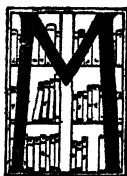
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BACK TO VICTORIA

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BY

J. JEFFERSON FARJEON



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To
MY DEAR WIFE

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BACK TO VICTORIA

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCING SIX VICTIMS

THE PERIOD of this story is the Pre-Atomic Age. The world had not yet become terrorised by its tiniest particles, and the power of the atom was still an entertaining, unproved, Wellsian theory. But scientists, working secretly and hopefully, knew they were on the verge of a revolutionary discovery which would either smash the world or save it to be smashed a little later on, and a worrying fellow called Hitler was about to provide them with their excuse for hurrying on with the job. Meanwhile other less potent forces had exploded the horse-bus, the silent film, the quiet evening at home, and the inevitability of the marriage service.

More to the point of our tale, no socialistic government had yet clasped to its bosom the myth of economic security. If you did not work, or were not sufficiently clever or privileged to make others work for you, your future was a very uncertain thing. It was in this atmosphere of uncertainty that the staff of Spare Parts Limited sat one Friday morning discussing their absent employer, but we may begin by discussing the members of the staff, who were shortly due themselves for a somewhat startling transformation.

They were six in number. The feminine element was supplied by Madeleine Trent, dark, slim, attractive, and despite her good looks a very efficient secretary. Before answering the advertisement of Edward P. Bloggs, who had not engaged her on account of her efficiency, she had held positions in three small hotels and one large stores, but she

had not held any of the positions for very long, partly on account of the troubles of beauty and partly on account of an unsettled disposition. Ever since her parents had died and her childhood home had been broken up, she had been trying to find out what she wanted, and at the age of twenty-three she was still searching. She never quite understood why she had accepted the secretarial job in Spare Parts Limited, still less why she had agreed to invest her small savings of £90 in the business. Had she believed Mr. Bloggs when he had assured her that, in addition to her generous salary, she could double her capital in six months? "I am giving all my chief employees an opportunity to participate in the profits," he had said, "because, for one thing, I believe as a moral principle that profits should be shared, and for another, it is only when a staff has such an interest that it—ah—works with full enthusiasm and—ah—gives of its best." It all sounded rather grand, and it doubled one's status as well as one's capital. In six months her £90 would be £180. In a year it would be £360. In three years she would be able to sign a cheque for four figures and go round the world. She had accepted the job.

As she had left the rather dingy little room where the interview had taken place, a room in which the only actual sign of anything doubling was dust, she had bumped into a young man standing on the pavement outside. "Sorry!" they both sang out, and then laughed. It was the sound of Madeleine's laughter and the memory of her smile that had ended Jerry Haines's hesitation and had sent him up the narrow staircase Madeleine had just descended to interview the man who had engaged her. A few moments previously, Jerry had been wondering whether he were a fool. It did not occur to him that now he was confirming his folly.

Edward P. Bloggs received him graciously, his large rather flabby cheeks expanding into welcoming curves. They never

remained expanded for long at a time, going suddenly flat again like pricked balloons. They were back in their punctured, deflated state when, greetings over, Mr. Bloggs got down to business.

"You look the sort of man I want," he said bluntly. "Young, alert, keen, intelligent. I'm a judge, Mr. Haines, I'm a judge. I can spot the brain behind the forehead just as I can smell money behind a business proposition. I claim no credit. I'm just made that way. But there may be a snag in this from your angle, so let's dispose of it at once, or part on it at once. I'm looking for an assistant manager who will have a financial stake in the business. You know why? Wrong! I don't need the capital. But it's my moral principle that profits should be shared—that is, of course, by the more responsible members of the staff. It is only when such members have such an interest that they—ah—work with full enthusiasm and—ah—give of their best."

Then Mr. Bloggs had explained how any capital invested in Spare Parts Limited would double itself in six months. By a stroke of ill luck, Jerry Haines had just been left £250 by his one and only aunt. He was not going to risk this, however, until he knew a little more about the situation.

"By the way, I bumped into a young lady who was just leaving as I came in," he said, casually, "was she after a job here, like myself?"

Mr. Bloggs had not been wholly wrong when he had described himself as a judge. He saw his chance, handed to him on a platter, and he leapt at it. His elastic cheeks became momentarily inflated with bulging curves. But they were flat again, and his own voice was casual, as he answered:

"Eh? Oh, Miss Trent. Yes, she will be my—ah—our secretary. Yes, yes, she will be with us. But you must not join us, Mr. Haines, if you feel unhappy or in the least doubtful. I never urge anything. No. It's a moral principle."

Jerry Haines did not feel at all unhappy, or in the least doubtful. While final details were being arranged, he was doubling £250 in his mind till it became £4000. Then he chopped off £1500 for a house in the country, and £20 for a pram . . .

But just before he left, a tiny qualm of conscience did cause him to confess:

"By the way—you've not asked, but perhaps I ought to mention it—I've had absolutely no experience of business."

Mr. Bloggs just saved himself from responding, "No need to tell me that, my boy!" Instead, with cheeks swelled almost to bursting point, he exclaimed, "Don't worry about that—you've got something else! But—ah—just as a matter of curiosity—what *have* you experience of?"

"Well, really, I'm an actor," replied Jerry, adding with the charming ingenuousness that sometimes got him undeserved engagements, "but not a frightfully good one."

Edward P. Bloggs grinned. "I'm a bit of an actor myself," he said, and then pushed his new assistant manager out rather hastily.

William Fingleton, clerk, could not plead lack of experience. His hair was prematurely grey with it, his flat, spectacled eyes were dull with it. At the age of twenty-one, yielding to the requests of neighbours and the urgings of a depressing knowledge borne out by his own ears, he had sold his violin and entered the service of Brown, Holding & Temperence. He had faithfully added up figures for them for thirty years, and had attended the funerals of all three. They had died, rather neatly, in the order mentioned on the firm's notepaper, and within a sufficiently short time of each other to allow one silk hat to do for the lot. The demise of Temperence had preceded the demise of the business, and for the first time in his uneventful life William Fingleton, at the

age of fifty-one, found himself out of a job. Which, he told himself gloomily, was exactly eleven years too old.

It was not to Fingleton's discredit, but rather to the discredit of Brown, Holding & Temperence, that during these thirty years with the firm their clerk had only been able to save £127 5s. 8d. The total would have been a little higher if, at the age of twenty-nine, he had not commented on a lovely evening to a rather pale-faced girl feeding the ducks in Regent's Park. This unusual audacity led to further meetings in the park, at first allegedly accidental, then admittedly deliberate. They were both lonely creatures. In six months they were married. In another six she died, leaving a strange memory that grew fainter and fainter as he added up his figures till it seemed at last to belong, not to him, but to some almost-forgotten person of whom he had once heard. Like that young chap who had once hoped to become a second Kreisler. Yet, despite the faintness and unrealness of the memory, William Fingleton always felt in an incoherent way that his one year of courtship and marriage was the only period in which he had really justified his existence. It was quite worth the loss to his standing capital at the age of fifty-one.

Unlike Madeleine and Jerry, he did not join the staff of Spare Parts Limited through answering Mr. Bloggs's attractive advertisement. Bloggs had had some dealings with his old firm shortly before its demise—dealings, we may be sure, which did nothing to sustain the expiring spark of life—and he had already met the patient, hard-working clerk. He had even had a heart-to-heart talk with him. Fingleton had not been out of work a week when he received a sympathetic note, asking him to call. The interview was short, startling, and to the point. Fingleton remembered every word of it.

"Sit down, Fingleton," Mr. Bloggs had said. "I am going to make a proposition to you, and I am making it to you

because I am a judge of character and I have judged yours. I understand you were with your last employers for some thirty years?"

"Thirty years and four months," replied Fingleton.

"Thirty years and four months," nodded Mr. Bloggs. "And—from our little conversation when I last saw you, I gathered you—ah—did not amass a fortune in all that time?"

"No, sir," blinked Fingleton.

"Now I don't expect you were able to set aside more than, say, fifty pounds a year? That would be—ah—fifteen hundred."

Fingleton became slightly pink at the surprising suggestion.

"Very much less than that, sir," he murmured.

"Come, come! Less? Did you say *less*? Bless my soul, it's scandalous, the way some good men are treated! Surely, after your long service, you were given a little interest in the firm?" And when Fingleton shook his head, Mr. Bloggs exclaimed, "Then what on earth *have* you been able to save? If that isn't an impertinent question?"

"Er—one hundred and twenty-seven pounds, sir," replied Fingleton, leaving out the five-and-eightpence.

Mr. Bloggs thumped his desk.

"By heaven, you shall increase that!" he cried. "You won't have to wait thirty years this time! You shall join my firm at the same salary you were getting, but—BUT, Fingleton, you shall be more than an employee, you shall be a shareholder, as well! I've a financier here who wants to invest three thousand pounds in Spare Parts Limited, but I'll tell him he can only have—let's see—two thousand eight hundred and seventy-five poundsworth. That will leave one-twenty-five for you. Don't thank me, don't thank me. I *believe* in this sort of thing! You might almost call it a moral principle. Members of a staff—trustworthy members—*should* share in the profits, for it is only when they have

such an interest that they—ah—work with full enthusiasm and—ah—give of their best.” He leapt to his feet and held out his hand. “Though *you* would give of your best, I am convinced, under any circumstances. No, no, no! Don’t thank me. Turn up next Monday, and we’ll fix up the details then.”

Fingleton staggered out of the office and had a cup of strong coffee at a shop at the corner. Before the coffee he had not been sure whether he would turn up next Monday. But after the coffee, he decided that he would. He also decided that he would retire on his fortune at sixty, and grow roses. He liked roses. . . . He might even buy a violin.

In an excellent humour, Edward P. Bloggs went to a theatre that night, and continued his good work with the commissioner who got him a taxi. “Pity this show’s coming off,” he remarked. “How does that affect you?” “We’re closing for a bit,” answered the commissioner, “and if I don’t lose my job I’ll lose my tips!” “Bad luck! Ever thought of a change?” “If it’s a change for the better!” “What’s your name?” “Smith.” “What’s your lunch hour?” “One o’clock, sir.” “Come and see me tomorrow between one and two, Smith.” And he added his business card to the tip.

Smith had done quite well on tips. Mr. Bloggs discovered, between one and two next day, that he had twenty pounds to play with. . . .

The commissioner, whose new duties were to give Mr. Bloggs’s enterprise a wholly fictitious atmosphere of importance, brought the staff up to four. The other two, completing the half-dozen, were drawn by the advertisement. Tim O’Hara beat other applicants for the position of traveller by requiring no salary. This seemed such an excellent qualification to Mr. Bloggs that surely it was a waste of time to discuss any other. O’Hara refused to let the matter rest

there, however, and insisted in extolling his virtues as an outside man. "For if I'm to be of any use to ye, Mr. Bloggs," he declared, "I must show ye my persuasive qualities, and maybe ye'll be thinkin' now that if I can sell an article like meself I'll be afther sellin' anything!"

"Well, you've sold yourself," replied Mr. Bloggs, "so you can keep the rest of your breath for the firm's business."

"Ah, but wait a minute, wait a minute!" exclaimed O'Hara. "Did I tell ye now about me car?"

"Do you want to sell me that, too?" enquired Mr. Bloggs, with noticeably less enthusiasm.

"Ah, now, would I be playin' ye a trick like that?" answered the Irishman, looking hurt. "'Tis the divil of a car. Me very name for it is Satan. But ye'll not be requirin' to get me a car, that's what I'm tellin' ye——" Mr. Bloggs had never had any intention of getting his traveller a car. "—and what it lacks in quality it makes up for in quantity, for 'tis larger than life and will take all the Spare Parts ye could pack into her. Faith, she needs a few herself!"

"You certainly know how to talk, Mr. O'Hara," commented Bloggs.

"Would I earn the salary I'm not gettin' if I were dumb?" retorted O'Hara.

"I'm not complaining," smiled Bloggs, "though I'll admit I'd rather have you for an outside than an inside man. Then it's all settled?"

"All but one thing, Mr. Bloggs."

"Oh! And that is?"

"Ye'll give me a salary afther the first month, and, of course, I get me commission from the start."

Mr. Bloggs smiled again. "I thought there was a catch in it," he said. But he promised. Promises were his one form of lavishness.

The last, and least, member of the staff was the office boy. Seventeen boys of all ages, shapes and sizes applied, and because it was impossible to judge how any of them would turn out, Robert Tonsil was selected entirely on account of his name. It had amused Mr. Bloggs at the end of a tiring day.

CHAPTER II

DAWNING OF THE TRUTH

MADELEINE glanced at the office clock.

"Two hours late," she remarked, grimly. "How much longer do we go on before we do something?"

"And what do we do when we do it?" added Jerry.

Fingleton cleared his throat. When he had been out of a conversation for some while he always cleared his throat before re-entering it. Smith called it his signature tune.

"Mr. Bloggs has been late before," he mentioned. "We must remember that."

"Yes, he was so late on Wednesday that he never turned up at all," retorted Madeleine, "and yesterday he was here for just forty-five minutes—which, in my humble opinion, was forty-five minutes too long!"

She tossed her dark head. Jerry Haines looked at her with a slight frown.

"Is that a generalisation," he asked, "or did something happen during the forty-five minutes to cause the opinion?"

Tonsil stopped drawing rather rude cupids in the Stamp book. He recalled having seen the pretty secretary emerge from the Chief's private sanctum with a high colour.

"If you would all like to know," she answered, "I boxed our dear boss's ears."

"Dear me!" blinked Fingleton.

"Lummy, miss, wot for?" asked Tonsil.

"I don't think we need worry Miss Trent for particulars," said Jerry, quickly.

Madeleine gave a short laugh.

"It wouldn't worry me in the least," she replied, "only I shouldn't think they were necessary. What do girls generally box men's ears for?"

"*Cave—'e's comin'!*" warned Tonsil, glancing towards the door.

Fingleton cleared his throat again. The operation was not merely his signature tune, but also his method of applying the closure. In silence they listened to ascending footsteps. But when the door opened it was Timothy O'Hara who saw them relax from their stiffened attitudes. His mood was so buoyant that he did not notice the heavy atmosphere he had walked into. He had been on the road a week, which represented half the firm's active existence.

"Well, and how's business?" he exclaimed. "Have ye all had your salaries doubled yet? I'll be havin' mine, though faith that won't cost the firm much for at the moment 'tis nothing! Chief in there?"

He jerked his head towards the door of Mr. Bloggs's office.

"No, he is not," answered Madeleine.

"Ah, that explains why ye are sittin' on the table swingin' your legs!" laughed O'Hara. "'Tis busy ye all look, I'll be sayin'! Is this all ye do while I'm sweatin' round the country gettin' business for ye? Out, eh? When d'ye expect him back?"

"We don't expect him back," said Madeleine. "He hasn't arrived yet, and one can't come back till one's been."

"Not arrived, is it?"

"Yesterday he was here for three-quarters of an hour, and the day before he didn't come at all."

"In fact," added Jerry, "this morning we haven't a very high opinion of our Mr. Bloggs."

"Ah, well, I expect he's just been waitin' for me to start the ball rollin'," said the Irishman, with a wink. "I've baited the ground in four counties, and I've interested ninety-

five people who didn't know what I was talkin' about any more than I knew myself, but who agreed that it sounded grand! Now all we need are the goods, and we'll get goin'."

"Yes—exactly," murmured Jerry, dryly.

Fingleton rubbed his nose thoughtfully, and looked a little pained. He was old-fashioned, and felt rather at sea with new methods of conducting business.

"You must have been somewhat handicapped, Mr. O'Hara, without any samples," he remarked.

"'Tis true, I was," admitted O'Hara, "and it takes an Irishman to talk successfully on nothing at all. But that's what I'm wantin' to talk to Bloggs about. I hope he won't be long."

"So do we, Mr. O'Hara," said Madeleine. "It's pay day."

"Yus, and so it was last Friday," chimed in Tonsil, "but I didn't get nothink!"

"Now, then, my boy!" exclaimed Fingleton, admonishingly.

O'Hara raised his eyebrows, and glanced enquiringly at the assistant manager.

"We were none of us paid," explained Jerry, "and we agreed to the postponement because—well, it was only a postponement. Something about—what was it?—delay in the procedure of starting the banking account."

"On the wireless they call it a technical hitch," said Madeleine.

A chilly little silence followed her remark, and the atmosphere which had been temporarily lightened by the Irishman's buoyant entrance began deteriorating again.

"Bloggs promised I should have some stuff when I go out again on Monday," said O'Hara. "Any sign of it?"

"Nothing has arrived here," answered Fingleton.

"You handle the correspondence, Miss Trent?"

"There have been three letters to firms containing vague orders," replied Madeleine. "When I say vague, I mean the goods ordered weren't specified. They were called just goods, but the value ran into hundreds. Mr. Bloggs told me, when I ventured to ask a question, that these letters were follow-ups of previous business begun by him over the telephone. You'll find the copies in the file."

O'Hara walked to the file, and turned up the copies. Jerry joined him. They read the letters gloomily. The addresses of the three firms to whom the orders had been sent were in Bristol, Newcastle, and Glasgow.

"Have you had any letters from them, then?" asked O'Hara:

"No," Madeleine told him.

"And was it yourself posted the letters that went out?"

"No. Mr. Bloggs posted them."

"Did he now?" murmured O'Hara. "Did he now?"

Jerry looked at him uneasily.

"What's that mean?" he asked.

"Of course, ye couldn't guess?" said O'Hara. Then suddenly shot out, "What's his private address?" Receiving no immediate answer he exclaimed, "What! Don't any of ye know it?"

"Do you?" retorted Madeleine.

Fingleton thought it time to play his signature tune.

"From next Monday," he said, "Mr. Bloggs will be at No. 19a, Fenner Crescent, W.2. Meanwhile he—er—is staying at an hotel."

"What hotel?"

"He did not mention that to me. Perhaps——?"

The clerk glanced around, to be met by silence. It was clear that Mr. Bloggs had not mentioned it to anybody. O'Hara asked:

"Is there a directory in the office?"

"Telephone," answered Madeleine.

"That's not the one I'm thinkin' of," said O'Hara, and ran out of the room.

He was away ten minutes. During the first eight no one spoke a word. A horrible depression was strangling speech, and the only creative work performed lay to the doubtful credit of the office-boy, who added twenty-six more cupids to the stamp book. It was the commissioner, ascending from the lonely street, who broke the long silence and prevented the birth of Cupid No. 27. Poking his head through the doorway, he enquired:

"When's the Ole Man expected?"

"What makes *you* ask that?" demanded Jerry.

"I lent him half-a-crown yesterday," said Smith. "For his taxi."

"You're lucky if that's all you lent him," murmured Jerry, which was hardly the way to speak of a Chief to a commissioner.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Oh!" After a moment's hesitation, Smith went on, "Anything up?"

"We hope not," replied Madeleine.

"If there is, we shall all learn in due course," added Fingleton.

"P'raps, but I was never one for due course. I like to know. Same as at race meetings. When Mr. O'Hara went out jest now he acted, as you might say, peculiar. Very peculiar. 'Smith,' he sez to me, 'Smith,' he sez, 'I hope you're not too fond of your present job.' 'Doing nothing suits me all right,' I sez. 'Well,' sez he, 'if you ain't soon looking for a job doing nothing outside somebody else's office,' he sez, 'Bob's me uncle.' That's his words. Bob's me uncle. Now, what did he mean by that?"

"You'd better ask him," suggested Fingleton, shortly.

He would like to have been able to tell the commissioner

he was interfering with their work, but there wasn't any work. It may have been because of his consciousness of this that Smith lingered, and a few moments later O'Hara returned.

"I've some pretty news for ye," he announced breezily, as he entered. "I've been to a post office, and I've consulted our old friend Kelly. There's no 19a in Fenner Crescent, W.2, because there's no Fenner Crescent, W.2. In fact, there's no Fenner Crescent anywhere. So, lads and lassies, what?" He turned to the commissionaire. "It's as I was tellin' ye, Smith. You'll have to be afther a new job."

"Not till I get my half-crown back!" retorted Smith, feelingly.

"Is it only half-a-crown he owes ye?"

"No, sir, he owes me a darn sight more'n that. Two weeks wages. Ay, and twenty pounds on top of that!"

Madeleine and Jerry looked up sharply. Fingleton kept his eyes on his boots. They were rather dazed eyes, and they stared at the boots as though unable quite to take them in. The boots looked a bit misty.

"Twenty pounds?" said Jerry.

"It's a fact," answered Smith.

"How does that happen?"

"Well, see, I'm sort of in the business—if you get me?"

"I'm afraid, Smith, it's Mr. Bloggs who's got you," replied Jerry, gravely, "and he's got me, too."

"How much for?"

It was Madeleine's question. She coloured after asking it, and Jerry looked at her with growing anxiety.

"If you want to know—and I don't feel this is a moment for any of us to hide anything—I've put £250 into the business."

"My God!" exclaimed Madeleine. "That makes my ninety look like dirt."

Jerry moistened his dry lips, and it was a good thing for

Mr. Bloggs that he did not walk in at that moment. Controlling himself with difficulty, Jerry turned to the clerk.

"I—I hope——" he began.

But Fingleton's expression dashed the hope. Fingleton was looking green.

"Er—yes—I did think, so to speak—a little flutter," he gulped. "I—er—yes."

"I hope, old chap, it was only a very little flutter?"

The size of the flutter suddenly overwhelmed William Fingleton, and he leapt to his feet.

"One hundred and twenty-five pounds!" he shrieked.

"One hundred and twenty-five pounds!"

Then he looked ashamed and astonished at himself, and sat down again quietly. In answer to enquiring glances, O'Hara shook his head.

"I'm luckier," he said. "All I've lost is me time, me petrol, and the wear and tear of me tyres. How about you, Winkle?"

Robert Tonsil, thus unceremoniously addressed, grinned. He had not yet developed any high spot of altruistic sympathy, nor shed any of his youthful keenness for sensation. Sensation of any kind. Wars, murders, corpses, fallen horses, things going up, things going bust. It didn't matter what. Anything that cut across the disastrous sameness of one ordinary hour to another.

"I never 'ad nothink to lose," he retorted. "See, I ain't no fernancier!"

O'Hara made a swift calculation.

"Then it looks," he said, at the end of it, "as if our Mr. Bloggs—if he doesn't turn up—has walked off with four hundred and eighty-five pounds, two-and-sixpence. Excluding unpaid salaries."

"Yes, and these," added Madeleine, taking a little pile of papers from a drawer, "are unpaid bills!"

Desperately clinging to hope, Fingleton reminded them

that they were only pursuing a theory, and that calamity, though probable, was not yet certain.

"There is one calamity, Mr. Fingleton, that grows more and more certain," responded the Irishman, and he spoke with impressive conviction, "and that is the calamity that is goin' to fall upon Mr. Bloggs when we find him!"

"Meanwhile, it falls upon us," said Jerry, dryly, "and what are we going to do about it? I'm afraid, Fingleton, there's no doubt that Bloggs is a rascal—and that we have all been mugs! The facts that he never mentioned the name of his temporary hotel, and that he invented the fictitious address he said he was moving to—well, they just shout! But, by Jove, we'll——"

He was interrupted by the telephone bell. Madeleine, seated nearest to the instrument, seized the receiver.

"If it's Bloggs," whispered O'Hara, "call him every name ye can think of!"

But it was not Bloggs.

"Spare Parts Limited," said Madeleine. "Yes. No, I'm afraid he isn't. Who——? No, he didn't mention it. He—he may be in at any moment. That is—— Oh, you don't think so? . . . Anyone else? Well, the assistant manager, Mr. Haines. Er——" She glanced towards Jerry. "Wait a moment, please. I'll just find out." Placing her hand over the mouth of the receiver, she asked, ironically, "Would you be free, Mr. Haines, to see a lady who wants to call on urgent business?"

"When does she want to call?" replied Jerry.

"She says she can be here in twenty minutes," answered Madeleine, "and I don't much like her tone."

"Nothing, this morning, is strictly likeable," said Jerry. "Tell her to come along."

Madeleine poured the information down the receiver, and then asked, "Just one moment, please. I didn't quite catch the name? What? . . . Yes, thank you. Good-bye."

She replaced the receiver.

"Her name is Lucy Clover," she said, "and she told us not to expect a four-leaf one, and her final remark was that she would have come whether you'd been engaged or not!"

"Aren't we a happy family, now?" murmured Tim O'Hara.



CHAPTER III

VICTIM NUMBER SEVEN

LUCY CLOVER, at her end of the line, laid down the receiver, waited a few moments, and then dialled a taxi rank. While the taxi was on its way, she went into her bedroom and put on her hat.

It was a very pretty hat. Some might have thought it a little too pretty, but Lucy Clover had always liked pretty things, and she always would. And, after all, she was only thirty-eight, and that was just nothing at all in these days of beauty parlours. But even without her full war paint, as for instance when she woke up in the morning and blinked her eyes open to another day, she was still attractive and did not feel in the least ashamed when the maid, or anyone else, entered the room. Indeed, it was something of a triumph to be able to hold your own under such obvious disadvantages. Perhaps she did keep a small powder-puff under her pillow.

The figure now reflected in her mirror was rather small and rather plump. Not grossly plump—there was nothing barmaidish about her, though barmaids are not necessarily gross—but just attractively curved to emphasize, without any doubt, the difference between the sexes. The good-looking secretary with whom she had just conversed over the telephone, and whom she was presently destined to meet, had almost the slim figure of a boy. Another difference between her and the secretary was that Madeleine's hair was very dark, and Lucy Clover's was very light. In former years it had dazzled the stalls across the footlights, and been responsible for more than one engagement. It may have played its part, for it had a lovely luminous natural sheen, in her final engage-

ment to George Harrington Clover, who took her to the Savoy one evening and earnestly described a succession of sleepless nights.

"I shall never get a full night's sleep till I am married to you," he had declared.

"Is that a compliment?" she had queried, opening her wide innocent eyes.

He had barely understood. He had more money than brains, and Lucy would really have appreciated both. But the years were passing, and she did not want to be "the third girl from the left" all her life, and when this had happened she was not the hell of a way off forty. And so, a week later at the Ritz, she had agreed to become Mrs. George Harrington Clover, which may not have been an heroic name but was a marked improvement on the name of Gummeridge with which she had set out.

She had enjoyed two years of married life. After the first raptures had worn off, it had been amusing to discover herself living with someone more brainless than herself. Indeed, to her interest and surprise, the business of marriage increased her intelligence, while with her husband, some years her junior, it seemed to have the opposite effect. For her, therefore, it may have been a blessing in disguise when George Clover fell off a Swiss mountain. She did not realise it, and although she had never possessed any passionate love for George, she mourned him sincerely, and dreaded the prospect of being once more at a loose end. And it was in this mood, after a year of widowhood, that she had met a gentleman named Edward P. Bloggs. . . .

The taxi stopped outside a tall rather shabby building. The shabbiness was accentuated rather than diminished by a smart commissionaire standing on the pavement. In a lower window was a sign: "Offices to Let." The commissionaire advanced to the taxi importantly and opened the door.

"I have an appointment with Mr. Haines, of Spare Parts Limited," said Lucy Clover, as she alighted.

"Ah, Mr. Haines," repeated the commissionaire, still with his air of dignity. No one should learn from Smith that matters were not as they should be. If this were indeed his last duty, he would end with a flourish! "I'll take you up, madam. This way."

He led her up the narrow stairs, pushed open a door to back premises—the door was marked "S.P.L.—Enquiries"—and announced in an impressive voice:

"A lady to see Mr. Haines."

As Lucy entered the outer office she received an impression that four limp people had suddenly stiffened. She wondered whether this always happened, or whether it was due to her forbidding atmosphere. She rather hoped the latter. She felt forbidding.

"What name, please?" asked the dark-haired girl sitting at a desk.

"Lu—Mrs. George Harrington Clover," answered Lucy. "I have an appointment."

"Yes, it was I who spoke to you over the telephone," said the girl. "I'll find out whether Mr. Haines can see you."

"Mr. Haines is going to see me, so there'll be no need for you to find out!" retorted the visitor. "Is that his door over there?"

"Yes."

"Thank you. Don't trouble."

And she marched to the door, flung it open without knocking, and passed through, closing it noisily behind her.

"As an entrance, I think that will pass!" murmured Madeleine.

"Sure, I couldn't do it better meself," said O'Hara.

"Lummy!" blinked Tonsil.

William Fingleton made no comment. He was still suffering from an earlier shock.

On the other side of the door, Lucy Clover gave the astonished young man she had called to see her most baleful expression. Once, in her musical comedy days, an irate producer had roared at her and five other girls, "Fer Gawd's sake, stop looking as though someone was giving you sugar-candy, and glare!" Now she glared with a ferocity that would have sent the producer into a seventh heaven of delight. The effect was telling.

"Are you Mr. Haines?" demanded Lucy, without even giving him time to say good morning.

"I am," replied Jerry.

"Oh! You are! And what's your position here? Are you the manager?"

"No, the assistant manager."

"Oh, yes, so they told me."

"Mr. Bloggs is the manager."

"Is he!" said Lucy Clover, vehemently. "Well, then, if he is the manager, why isn't he here to attend to his business?"

The answer was obvious. There was no business to attend to. But Jerry kept this to himself.

"Er—may I know *your* business, Miss Clover?" he enquired.

"You certainly may," replied the visitor. "My business is Spare Parts Limited!"

Jerry's eyes opened wide. His surprise was so ingenuous that the hardness within Lucy Clover's breast began to soften.

"I don't quite understand," murmured Jerry.

"Then it's time you did," retorted Lucy. "Do you know how much capital is invested in your company?"

Jerry knew of £485 2s. 6d., but he did not mention that. Instead he answered, "No."

"Don't you?" Lucy looked at him curiously. "I should have thought, being assistant manager, you might have known it. However, Mr. Haines, I'm not a business woman, or I'd never be in my present position. My conscience, I wouldn't!

The capital of this business is ten thousand pounds, and two thousand of it is mine!"

"*Was!*" thought Jerry, and wished the floor would swallow him.

Lucy waited for the comment that did not come, while Jerry waited for his mind to unwhirl. Two thousand pounds! *Two thousand pounds!* That made two thousand four hundred and eighty-five, two-and-sixpence. Lucy's voice broke in on his further calculations.

"Didn't you hear me?"

"Er—yes—I heard you."

"Well, then!"

"What?"

"I've come to talk about it, and as Mr. Bloggs isn't here I suppose I've got to talk about it to *you!*" Suddenly she exclaimed, "Where is Mr. Bloggs?"

"I don't know," replied Jerry.

"What—*you* don't know where he is?"

"I'm afraid not, Miss Flower."

"The name is Clover, and it's Mrs."

"I beg your pardon."

"That's all right. But please tell me, Mr. Haines, and don't think me rude—do you know *anything?*"

Jerry Haines took a deep breath, and accepted the situation.

"Very little," he admitted. "If you're not a business woman, I'm afraid I'm not a business man——"

"Then how——?"

"Do I become assistant manager of Spare Parts Limited? Because, Mrs. Clover, I am a mug. And Mr. Bloggs collects mugs." He flushed. "I beg your pardon——"

But Lucy Clover had not taken offence. Indeed, by now, she had lost her balefulness, and she almost smiled. She had been told so many lies in her life that the truth always refreshed her.

"Don't apologise," she said. "I can take it. But, please, just tell me what is happening here?"

"Yes, of course," answered Jerry. "You've a right to know. But I wonder whether you'd mind giving me your information first? Would you? Mine will follow."

"Well—so long as it does follow!" She paused, and considered. Things sounded so idiotic in words. Still, things were idiotic, including herself. She plunged. "I had a little capital, and one day I thought it would be more fun to put it into something than to have it in the bank, so I looked through the advertisements of businesses in my paper, there were lots, and chose one with a pin. It was Spare Parts Limited, and after writing to the Box Number, I had an answer from your Mr. Bloggs."

"Not mine, please," begged Jerry.

"He's certainly not mine, either. I thought him pleasant enough, though, when he called to see me at my flat. I thought he'd want me to call at his office, but he said he hadn't quite fixed up his premises yet. 'I wouldn't care to ask a person like you to fall over workmen and paint-pots,' he said. A person like me! Do I strike you like the Countess of What-Not, Mr. Haines?"

"Not now," he replied. She lifted her eyebrows. "A little, perhaps, when you first came into this room."

"Oh! I see! Well, if I seemed like a countess then, and seemed anything like I felt, all I can say is they must be a pretty sultry lot!" She gave a short laugh, then frowned. Was she shedding her sultriness too quickly? She looked at Jerry dubiously, then shrugged and went on: "Anyhow, Mr. Bloggs was most polite, and even when I told him I'd tumbled over plenty of workmen and paint-pots in my time—Mr. Bloggs didn't know that I used to be on the stage—he went on treating me as if I was a person of importance. One likes that—if one is—a mug? I fell for it properly. But it really did seem what I think you call a good proposition, Mr.

Haines," she added, earnestly. "Spare Parts! People are always needing them, aren't they? And how often they can't get them! Don't trouble to try here, there and everywhere, but just state your difficulty to Spare Parts Limited, and if we haven't got 'em in stock, which it's up to us to have, we know where to get 'em at a moment's notice." Her voice became Mr. Bloggs's as she reeled off these details, displaying her histrionic qualities. "Oh, yes, it all sounded fine! I was going to double my capital in six months, and—what's the matter?"

"Go on, go on!" groaned Jerry.

"No, what was it?"

"Just that the phrase had a familiar sound."

She shot him a shrewd glance.

"You—don't mean——?"

"Please go on. I've promised to tell mine afterwards."

"Very well. But there isn't much more. I told him I didn't know much about business, and he suggested that I ought to see a solicitor so that everything would be watertight and shipshape. The dear man even sent me one next day. Wasn't it kind of him? Oh, my God! I wonder how much Mr. Swallow, of Swallow, Bird and Swallow, swallowed of the cheque I made out to him? Or perhaps he was Mr. Bloggs himself with moustache and whiskers! Well, goodness, I'm not going into all the particulars. All that matters is that, after a few days, I found I was a shareholder in Spare Parts Limited to the tune of two thousand pounds, and that after a few days more I was calling myself names, and wanted the two thousand pounds back again. But could I get it?"

"It would surprise me."

"I couldn't even get Mr. Bloggs or Mr. Swallow! All the interviews had been at my flat, and when I called to see Mr. Swallow, whose address was on some of the papers, though not his telephone number, my taximan couldn't find the

road because it didn't exist! What do you know about that?"

"And what about Mr. Bloggs's address?" asked Jerry.

"He said he was moving, and wouldn't be there till next Monday."

"Was it 19a, Fenner Crescent, W.2.?"

"That's it."

"Well, that doesn't exist, either."

Lucy Clover swallowed.

"But didn't he give you his previous address?" asked Jerry.

"Yes, the hotel where he was staying."

"Oh! You got that?"

"Why not?"

"He didn't give it to us. I suppose you tried it?"

"Several times, but he was always out."

"Did you phone?"

"I couldn't get him."

"Did you write?"

"He didn't reply. And the last time I tried the hotel I was told he had gone, and had left no posting address. Of course, I ought to have got advice. But if you want the bloody truth—yes, bloody—I was so ashamed of myself that I couldn't pluck up the courage to let anybody else know it!"

Jerry nodded sympathetically.

"I know the feeling," he said. "But, look here, there's something else you could have done—what you're doing now! This office. Why not before? I should have thought you'd have tried here first."

"I did try it first," answered Lucy.

"What, you called here? I don't remember——"

"I didn't say I called here. I said I tried to. But the address on my papers was not the address I've now come to. It was 156, Rolliter Way, Balham. There isn't any Rolliter Way, Balham."

"Whew," muttered Jerry, and wiped his brow. "No

wonder he's flown while the flying's good! When did you find *that* out?"

"First of all. Then I tried Mr. Swallow and then the hotel. After that I seemed sunk, because even if the firm was on the telephone it wouldn't be in the book yet. It was only this morning that I got the brainy idea of getting on to Telephone Enquiries. They told me there was a number, and they gave it to me. And then I rang you up. It's a wonder he gave you a telephone, but I suppose he couldn't have fooled his own staff without that, and perhaps he meant to keep the game going a bit longer and has only flitted now because it's been getting too hot? Well, anyhow, Mr. Haines, that is my story—so now what is yours?"

"Unfortunately it isn't mine only," answered Jerry, rising from his chair. "It's the story of five others, as well. If you don't mind, I'll bring them in."

During the next half-hour Lucy Clover learned first-hand from the staff of Spare Parts Limited all they were able to tell her, but the one thing she wanted to know most of all was not known by anybody—namely, the whereabouts of Mr. Edward P. Bloggs. When the sad tales were told, and mutual sympathy had been expressed all round, she put the blunt question.

"Then what are you all going to do?"

"Wind up, I suppose," answered Jerry, "and then look for new jobs."

"What *I'm* going to look for," declared Lucy, vehemently, "is Mr. Bloggs!"

"I don't imagine you'll be alone in that," remarked Madeleine. "There's a little pile here of unpaid bills. By the way, do *we* have to pay them?"

"What a terrible idea! What makes you think that?"

"I don't think it—I just want to be quite sure we don't! It would be awful if, having money in the business, we were responsible!"

Fingleton cleared his throat, and they turned to him as the member with most experience.

"The debtor is the firm," he stated, "and claims against a limited company can only be settled out of the firm's assets. If the firm hasn't any assets, that would be the misfortune of the creditors."

"Cheers!" murmured Madeleine. "Thank you for those comforting words!"

"Always assumin'," put in O'Hara, "this *is* a limited company? We're bankin' on it without any evidence."

Fingleton again came to the rescue.

"In any case," he said, "there could be no claim against any of us individually unless we had signed any document which—so to speak—established us as partners. I take it, none of us have signed such documents?"

None of them had.

When the depressing conference ended they had reached only one decision. This was to make assurance doubly sure by seeing the week out—there was only one more day to go—and then to leave the sinking ship before they went under with it. After that? No one knew. Their weary minds were too tired to explore the dismal future. Lucy Clover returned to her flat. Five members of the staff went out to lunch. But Tim O'Hara stayed behind to hold the fort, and also to hold Mr. Bloggs if by a miracle he put in an appearance.

He spent the time smoking, yawning, and reading a newspaper. Just before the lunchers came back, he read something that arrested his attention. It had nothing to do with Mr. Bloggs. It had nothing to do with Spare Parts Limited. Probably no one but a wild Irishman would have thought twice about it. But his interest in what he read was so absorbing that Madeleine had to touch his shoulder before he realised his lonely vigil was over. He looked up, with a grin.

"Of course, I'm mad," he said.

"But we've always known that, darling," replied Madeleine. She had recklessly had wine with her lunch.

"Faith, 'tis fine to be in agreement!" laughed O'Hara. "Good afternoon. I'll be seein' ye in the mornin'."

And, stuffing the newspaper in his pocket, he ran out of the building and leapt into his car.



CHAPTER IV

O'HARA BRINGS NEWS

THE STAFF of Spare Parts Limited did not see their traveller for another twenty-four hours, and they were just about to close the doors of the office for ever and repair to a funereal lunch when the Irishman's ancient car came to a halt outside with a death-wail. A few minutes later Timothy O'Hara bounded into their presence.

"Praise be, it's in time I am!" he cried. "I thought ye might all be gone!"

"Yes, you're just in time for the burial service," replied Jerry Haines, gloomily.

He was feeling very depressed, and was in no mood for the Irishman's exuberance.

"Is it as bad as that!" said O'Hara, and glanced at Madeleine.

Madeleine was not feeling much happier than Jerry. Despite the trials and tribulations of the past fortnight—possibly on account of them, for trouble shared produces its special brand of companionship—the staff had developed a pleasant friendliness, and now felt as though a family were being broken up. But Madeleine never allowed adversity to get completely on top of her. She was perpetually intrigued by the unknown morrow, and she always held herself ready for the unexpected.

"Perhaps not quite as bad as that," she answered O'Hara, "but if you join our farewell lunch don't expect us to be in top form."

"And is that mattering if I'm in top form meself?" he retorted.

Jerry groaned inwardly. O'Hara's ebullition was going

to be even worse than he had expected. Evidently hearts already depressed were about to be further deflated by blatant jests and tactless good-humour. Probably O'Hara would make a funny farewell speech designed disastrously to cheer them!

Fingleton, contending against his own gloom, cleared his throat and tried to make the best of it.

"I am sure we are all very glad to have Mr. O'Hara with us," he said. "We were just about to pop across to Sherwell's, Mr. O'Hara, for—so to speak—a last little bite."

"So do not let us stand upon the order of popping, but let us pop!" cried Madeleine. "Come along, folks! I don't know how you feel, but I've a tremendous urge to get the door of Spare Parts Limited completely behind me. By the way, Jerry, what do we do with the office keys?"

"Dear me!" blinked Fingleton. "Yes! The office keys! Dear me!"

"Why not post them to 19a, Fenner Crescent, W.2.?" suggested O'Hara.

"Oh! Lovely idea!" exclaimed Madeleine.

"But—er—surely, I thought there was no such address?" mentioned Fingleton.

"No, and there isn't any Spare Parts Limited," retorted Madeleine. "I call this sheer beauty! Mr. Bloggs told us he would be at 19a, Fenner Crescent on Monday, and it's his own funeral if he's not there to receive his mail! Jolly good mark for you, Mr. O'Hara! I say, what a headache the Post Office will have trying to trace a man who's vanished from an address that doesn't exist! Picture the keys travelling round and round the world for years, till they end up in some cobwebby pigeonhole of the dead letter office!"

"But wouldn't they be returned to the sender?" asked O'Hara. "Which, being Spare Parts Limited, would land them in the letter-box on the wrong side of the door—a door no one could open for lack of them?"

Everybody laughed but Robert Tonsil. While following the travels of the keys in his mind, he had taken them far more seriously, and now a startling picture formed, developed from O'Hara's last suggestion.

"Yus, and then," he said sepulchrally, "when at last the police turn up and force the door, wot do they find? Not only the keys, but Mr. Bloggs's body lyin' on the floor!"

He gazed on the floor intently as he spoke. He saw that body.

"I think," Madeleine proposed, in a gentle voice, "it is really time we moved."

And so, after a last look round to ensure that no personal property was being left behind to form evidence in a future murder trial, the staff of Spare Parts Limited trooped out of the office, the key was turned, and they descended to the street. Here, by the Irishman's car, they paused.

"Er—you *are* coming with us?" asked Jerry.

O'Hara nodded a disappointing affirmative.

"Of course I'm comin' with ye!" he replied. "Haven't I got to tell ye all about your new jobs?"

"Treat the poor lad gently," murmured Madeleine. "The situation has evidently turned his brain."

"Faith, I'll be turnin' yours in a minute!" laughed O'Hara. "Did ye think now that I'd come along to shed tears with ye? If weepin' there be, I'll do that by meself. Come along, now—and if I'm daft, ye can tell me that at Sherwell's."

Ten minutes later, over meals varying from beef and Yorkshire to fish and chips, Timothy O'Hara was unfolding his strange tale, and it was indeed a strange tale that he had to tell. In spite of his confident demeanour a qualm of doubt assailed him as, the orders given and the meal started, he groped in his mind for the best way to begin. All at once the best way occurred to him, startling in its simplicity. It was to begin at the beginning.

He rapped the rather soiled table-cloth for attention, then waited till Fingleton got over a little coughing fit. Fingleton was easily disturbed when swallowing.

"Do ye all remember, now," said O'Hara, "that when you went to lunch yesterday, I nobly restrained me own appetite and stayed behind to hold the fort?"

"We do," answered Madeleine. "Today, of course, it's not necessary because there's no fort to hold."

"Strictly speaking," interjected Fingleton, "quite strictly speaking, I am still a little worried about our procedure. I cannot help wondering whether it is—er—precisely——"

"It may not be precisely," agreed O'Hara, "but Mr. Bloggs's procedure hasn't been precisely, either, so we won't be worryin' afther that. We've other things to think about. Where was I?"

"Holding the fort," Jerry reminded him.

"Ah, so I was. And smokin', and yawnin', and readin'—and 'tis the readin' I'm goin' to talk to ye about. For begorra what I read was what sent me out of the office as soon as you all came back into it, and took me on the journey I've just returned from. Faith, I didn't even stop to wash, I was so fearin' to miss you."

"Mr. O'Hara," said Madeleine, patiently.

"Miss Trent?" replied O'Hara.

"When you talk to your prospective customers, does it always take you as long as this to get to the point?"

O'Hara grinned.

"I've heard ye call Mr. Haines Jerry," he said.

"Then for God's sake get on with it, Tim!" Madeleine answered.

She liked this mad Irishman, but had decided that it would be a mistake to like him too much. Unrepentantly, O'Hara still grinned at her.

"Ye'll not be speakin' like that up in Derbyshire," he remarked.

"Oh! Are we going to Derbyshire?"

"'Tis quiet and polite ye'll be. No swearin'. No arms on the table. No knees showin'."

Fingleton cleared his throat, with the welcome result that O'Hara hurried his narrative before the clerk could make another of his rather painful interruptions.

"Now, then, we're off!" said O'Hara. "What I was readin' was an advertisement. A most amazin' advertisement. It said—well, I'll tell ye what it said, for I have it on me." He dived into his pocket and brought forth a bulging wallet. Extracting the advertisement from a mass of other contents, he cleared his own throat, and proceeded: "Now, listen to this. 'Wanted immediately. A complete new staff of seven, to run old family seat in old family way. In highly unlikely event of staff proving suitable, and carrying out very special instructions, considerable ultimate advantage may accrue——' I like the wordin' of that, now 'considerable ultimate advantage may accrue to the applicants. Fuller particulars given at personal interview. Apply, in writing, Sir Walter Cresswell, Cresswell Hall, Cresswell, Derbyshire.' Now, what do ye make of that?"

He replaced the advertisement in his wallet, while his audience wondered what they made of it.

"What did *you* make of it?" asked Jerry Haines.

"Nothing at all, at all," answered O'Hara. "But bein' a bit of a lunatic meself, I was intrigued by what ye may call a sense o' sympathy. And I'm a firm believer in the number 'seven.'"

"And—is that where you've been? To Cresswell Hall."

"In me own little car."

"The advertisement said, 'Apply in writing,'" pointed out Fingleton, the strict observer of rules.

"I wrote a note just before I got there," replied O'Hara, blandly, "and was me own postman. Would ye like to hear what I said in the note? I'll read it to ye. I've got a copy,

because I made a blot on it and had to write it out again. 'Tis a mistake to apply for a job with a blot."

Once more he produced his overstocked wallet, and extracted a sheet of paper.

"'Dear sir,'" he read. "'On behalf of myself and sundry others, I beg to request an interview in reference to your advertisement for a new staff. It appears to the writer that you require a staff with unusual qualifications and of infinite variety, and we are undoubtedly both qualified and varied. Whether we shall be able to carry out the special duties you evidently require to the considerable ultimate advantage at which you kindly hint, cannot be judged until we know more about you and you know more about us, but if the followin' points have any interest for you, the undersigned is at the door waitin' to be interviewed. (1) We are honest and sober. (2) Our last employer was neither. (3) This explains why we are now all out of a job. (4) We are not sorry to leave our last employer, though strictly speakin' he left us, but we would be sorry to leave each other, hence this application in force. (5) You may consider it an advantage that, havin' all worked together, we know each other's ways and means, our ways however bein', admittedly, superior to our means. (6) For partial explanation of above reference, see "2." (7) Should your special duties require enterprise and originality, the speed and form of this application may indicate our possession of same. (8) We are seven, and therefore numerically correct. Yours hopefully, signed T. O'Hara. Postscript. Ye may have guessed I'm Irish, but the other six are strictly English.'"

The silence that followed the reading of this unique application was broken by Fingleton on a characteristic point of accuracy.

"You mention seven," he said, "but that is an error. We are only six."

"I've included one absentee," replied O'Hara.

"Who would that be?"

"Mrs. Clover."

"What! Mrs. Clover!" exclaimed Jerry. "You don't really imagine *she'd* come in on this?"

"Truth to tell, did I imagine any of ye would?" answered O'Hara.

"Well—*did* you?" demanded Madeleine.

"Faith, I've no notion," answered O'Hara, "but don't be cross with me now! We're all out of jobs, but there's no compulsion. I'm just—showin' ye the sample, as it were, but 'tis up to you whether you want to buy."

Jerry Haines nodded. After a covert glance at Madeleine, he said:

"Personally I rather like the idea, but I'm not buying it till I know a bit more about it. Actually, of course, the whole thing's absolutely fantastic!" He glanced at Madeleine again. "Isn't it?"

"Oh, daft!" she agreed. "I never heard of anything more lurid! But, for the work of a lunatic, I must say Tim's letter was rather a masterpiece. What happened, Tim, when you presented it? We've not heard that yet."

O'Hara chuckled. He was feeling happy. He could read signs.

"I presented it," he answered, "to a sullen maid who had tried to make up like Merle Oberon and Loretta Young and succeeded in neither. She had so much scent that I had to fan meself after she had gone off to deliver it. Ah, but what a hall it was to wait in! I've not told ye about that! Or the grounds—like a small park, they are, and the house standin' in the middle as if it had grown there, like the trees——"

"In fact, you fell for it," interposed Madeleine.

"I fell for it," admitted O'Hara.

"But not for the overpainted maid," Jerry reminded him, "who has just gone off with your note."

"So she has! And here am I waitin' with a funny feelin'

in the middle of me stomach. And now she's comin' back lookin' more sullen than ever because me little letter had done its job and she was to admit me when she wanted to boot me out with a kick in the pants! And I think to meself, 'If you're a sample of the present staff of Cresswell Hall, 'tis not surprisin' that Sir Walter and his lady want to make a clean sweep!' Mind ye, it was late for the call, as the maid reminded me—last night it was, with me too impatient to wait for the mornin'—and 'tis true that when I saw Sir Walter and Lady Cresswell in the drawing-room—ah, a gem of a room that was, with its long windows and blue hangings and glass chandelier and all—when I saw them, I thought to meself that 'twas time they were both in bed.' He paused. "Now, how is it you've been picturing them all the while I've been talkin'."

"Couple o' nobs," suggested Smith, making his first contribution to the conversation.

"Lord and Lidy Gulverstone," added Tonsil.

"Who are Lord and Lady Gulverstone?" enquired O'Hara.

Tonsil looked at him rather pityingly.

"The couple 'oo was murdered in *Blood on the Third Stair*," he replied. "Ain't you read it?"

"Afraid not," smiled O'Hara. "How old were Lord and Lady Gulverstone before their unfortunate demise?"

"Wot?"

"At what age were they murdered?"

"It didn't say."

"Were they eighty apiece?"

"Lummy, no!"

"Well," said O'Hara, "I should judge Sir Walter and Lady Cresswell to be about eighty apiece—but of course *that* doesn't describe 'em. They are a most extraordinary couple—a most extraordinary couple—and it was a most extraordinary interview. Faith, the moment I saw them I felt meself back in the nursery—does that tell ye anything?"

—and afther the maid had been dismissed, praise be—ah, she was a bitch of a maid, though that's not a word I'd use at Cresswell Hall—afther she'd been dismissed I had a queer sensation that if I didn't give the right answers I'd be put in a corner! But, mind ye, don't get the picture wrong. I liked them while they terrified me. No, 'tis impossible, I can't describe me feelin's. But here's this. Although that old couple were so fragile you felt if you touched them they'd fall to bits, they seemed more solid than meself! They'll be crumblin' in their graves while I'm still runnin' about loose, but 'twas I who was the temporary one, and them the permanent. They—they——”

“They *got* you,” interposed Madeleine.

O'Hara laughed.

“They did that!”

“But did you get *them*?”

“I'm tellin' ye! ‘Good evenin’, Mr. O'Hara,’ said Sir Walter. ‘Good evenin’, Sir Walter,’ said I. ‘Good evenin’,’ said Lady Cresswell. ‘Good evenin’,’ said I. ‘Do you like Picasso?’ said Sir Walter. ‘Well, 'tis not my fancy,’ I said. What is Picasso?”

“Picasso is an artist,” replied Jerry, “though some might argue the point.”

“An artist!” exclaimed O'Hara, in surprise. “I thought mebbe 'twas some Italian dish, and I hate all foreign food. But evidently I gave the right answer, for the old couple nodded at each other, and then Lady Cresswell asked, ‘And service flats?’ ‘I wouldn't be found dead in one,’ I said. Ah, wait! I can see what's on the tip of your tongue! Why did I answer that? What have I got against 'em? Nothin'. But 'tis me belief Heaven was watchin' me and whisperin' the right answers. And daft though the old couple were—ah, the sight of them, sittin' there so feeble and fragile in that big Victorian room—yes, daft though they were, to give the wrong answers was not to be thought of! . . . They exchanged

approvin' glances again, and then, each in turn, fired a lot more questions at me. Did I like cocktails? Did I like jazz? What was my opinion of croonin'? Did I jitter-bug? What were my politics? Could I live without wireless? What was my view about contraception?"

"Wot's that?" asked Tonsil, who like the commissionaire was doing his best to follow.

Fingleton cleared his throat violently.

"Life's a long while, laddie," said O'Hara, "and ye've plenty of time to learn. Well, the upshot was that, afther I'd had more questions fired at me than a film star gets from a boatload of reporters, I was sent out of the room while Sir Walter and his lady went into private conference. I was to return when they rang a bell. When it rang, I went back, and was told that we were all engaged for a month on approval, and that we were to report for duty by midday on Monday next as ever was." He paused, and glanced round the table enquiringly. "So the question now before us is—*do we?*"

"It's a question that needs a little time for thought," said Jerry, guardedly. "I notice we're none of us eating. Shall we have an adjournment of five minutes, and think while we munch?"

"Jolly good idea," agreed Madeleine, although her own mind was already made up.

Fingleton looked at his watch. While the rest ate and thought, he only thought. He was living in a temporary daze and the abrupt switch over from a life of rules and routines to the formlessness of lunacy, and from a capital of a hundred and twenty-seven pounds five and eightpence to nil, took away all appetite. At the end of the five minutes he gave the company a few more moments of grace, and then cleared his throat.

"Time, Mr. Fingleton?" enquired Madeleine.

"Er—yes," he answered.

"Then I'll lead off," she said. "Chalk me down yes. I'm all for it."

O'Hara gave her a rather wicked wink.

"Are ye sure ye can live without jazz and wireless?" he asked.

"Not all my life, perhaps," she replied, "but beggars can't be choosers. There's one thing I don't understand, though. All those questions were asked of *you*! How do they know that the rest of us share your most convenient views?"

"Because I told them you did. 'Ah, I can vouch for them all,' I said, 'we're a most unusual crew.'"

"And they believed it?"

O'Hara rubbed his nose thoughtfully.

"They've engaged us," he said.

"They must be very simple!"

"Mebbe—mebbe."

"Or may be not," exclaimed Jerry. "Perhaps we're going too fast. We've been badly caught once—we don't want to come a second cropper."

"That's true, Jerry," said Madeleine, seriously, "and I wouldn't chalk my yes on the board if this were another case of investing capital. Only it's something quite different. Somehow it has—it has such a peaceful sound—and it keeps us all together. If there's nothing else to it, we could regard it as a month in the country, all expenses paid. Oh, by the way, Tim, I suppose all expenses *will* be paid?"

"Livin' expenses?" answered O'Hara. "Ah, we can count on that."

"How about travelling expenses?"

"Lady Cresswell mentioned them, and I gave her a good mark for it, but I told her we wouldn't be needin' any travellin' expenses."

"Oh! And why not?"

"Mebbe I wanted to make a good impression, and to

show that we had what ye might call financial restraint. Mebbe I was playin' for a good mark, too."

"But——"

"Are ye forgetting me old car? Sure it'll take the lot of us."

"I doubt whether it will assist the good impression when we turn up in it!" remarked Madeleine, grimly.

"And there's another thing you've not mentioned, old chap," said Jerry. "Our salaries. Did you want to make another good impression by suggesting we didn't need any?"

"And—er—if I might mention yet another little point," added Fingleton, "what, precisely, will be our duties? I think the—er—the phrase in the advertisement was 'staff.' It would assist our deliberations if the, so to speak, implications of the phrase were made a little clearer."

O'Hara nodded, and tried hard not to feel anxious.

"Yes, of course—duties and salaries," he replied. "I must give you a little more information about that. Faith, there's been so much to talk about!"

For the third time he produced his bulging wallet, and extracted another paper.

"'Tis this way we worked it out," he said, and read:

"Steward	Mr. J. Haines
Housekeeper	Mrs. G. H. Clover
Parlourmaid	Miss M. Trent
Butler	Mr. B. Smith
Cook	Mr. T. O'Hara
Gardener	Mr. W. Fingleton
Odd Jobs	Mr. R. Tonsil."

This intriguing list created a profound impression, and O'Hara missed no expression as each item was read. Perhaps the happiest expression was that of William Fingleton. His cheeks became suddenly pink. A gardener! Among roses!

Fantastic, fantastic! But here was somebody talking about it. It was down in black and white—Gardener, Mr. W. Fingleton.

"Does the parlourmaid get any help when she is dusting the large Victorian drawing-room with the blue curtains?" enquired Madeleine. "I've an idea that, in spite of being an octogenarian, Lady Cresswell will spend her mornings toddling around the place and passing an enquiring finger over surfaces!"

"There's a kitchen wench remainin', and the housekeeper may help you," answered O'Hara, "not to mention the butler and Odd Jobs. And the cook, if he has any off moments, ye'll find very good-natured."

"*Can you cook?*"

"Sure, I'm a first-class cook. 'Twas only me modesty that stopped me describin' meself as a chef."

"What does a steward do?" asked Jerry.

"I thort they was on'y on ships," said Tonsil.

"There's another kind on land," replied O'Hara, "though divil I know what they do." He turned to the commissionaire. "How about you for the butler, Smith?"

"Well, sir, I've been a batman," blinked Smith.

"Then you'll make an A1 butler. If the work's too heavy, we can complain, and if complainin's no good, we can leave at the end of the month. Any more questions?"

"You have omitted the vital one of salary," Jerry reminded him.

"Ah, I was wonderin' who'd be remindin' me that!" smiled O'Hara. "Here's the wage list, and if ye don't like it, now's the time to say so."

The list was passed round. They all liked it. Not one complaint was raised.

"I must be a very superior maid to be getting all this," remarked Madeleine. "Will the other maid—the one who let you in—put me through my paces?"

O'Hara shook his head.

"She'll be gone before we come," he answered, "with all the rest of 'em barrin', I understand, the kitchen wench and the lot at the lodge."

"Oh! Who are they?"

"The lodge-keeper and couple of under-gardeners."

Fingleton looked astonished. Was he to lord it over two under-gardeners? Of course, now he came to think of it, he could hardly keep a small park neat all by himself. . . .

"You might tell me one thing more, Tim," said Madeleine. "Of course, it's a wonderful cop to be selected as a superior maid in an ancestral seat, but didn't it occur to you that I might have preferred the post of housekeeper?"

O'Hara looked a little worried. This was another question he had been waiting for.

"Ye can be housekeeper if you want," he replied.

"Thank you, but I'm not sure till I know why you favoured Mrs. Clover."

"Well—it was like this, now. I had a feelin' that we'd better be afther danglin' a bit of a carrot before Mrs. Clover—to make sure of her. But——"

"No, that's good enough!" laughed Madeleine. "You're doing very well, Tim. Mrs. Clover can have the carrot, and let's hope she's donkey enough to nibble."

O'Hara grinned, and then smiled round the table.

"Then is it settled?" he asked.

"It seems you've already settled it," replied Jerry. "But we might have a show of hands?"

Seven hands were raised. In his eagerness, Robert Tonsil raised two.

CHAPTER V

LUCY CLOVER RECEIVES VISITORS

LUCY CLOVER had two visitors that day. The first was a man with a poker face. In fact, he was poker in every way. He betrayed neither his emotion nor his philosophy, his age nor his nationality, but although he was English he had no particular characteristic of his race, and might have been Chinese. Even his weight was deceptive; he was small and stocky. But since he was not a boxer or a jockey, no one was interested in his weight. His initials, by which he was known to his few intimates, suggested some association with the turf, but actually they merely stood for the rather unimpressive name of George Gem.

As he ascended the self-working lift of the block of flats in which Lucy Clover lived, he appeared to be half-asleep. No one would have believed that he noticed anything. He had cultivated this disarming semblance. But he noticed everything. Often, he admitted to himself, too much. Of what use, for example, was it to know that there was a small scratch beneath the third button of the lift, that the lift gave a tiny click as it passed each floor, and that the atmosphere inside the slowly-ascending boxlike compartment had a faint mingling of stale scent with its stuffiness? Such details merely clogged the mind, and had to be pushed away when they obtruded.

Lucy Clover opened the door of her flat to him.

"Mr. Gem?" enquired Mrs. Clover.

"Correct," answered G.G. No, it was not her scent. "Mrs. Clover?"

"Yes. Please come in."

She led him to a small sitting-room. Of course, it might

be her scent, for it had been stale, and the scent of today is not necessarily the scent of yesterday. The clock wasn't going. It had stopped at twenty-three minutes to four. A pity you could never tell whether a clock had stopped A.M. or P.M. There might be some way. Nothing's impossible. . . .

"Sit down, Mr. Gem."

G.G. sat down. Damn hard chair.

"And now please tell me. Do enquiry agents trace people?"

"That is one of their jobs," answered G.G.

"I had an idea that you only watched or followed them," said Lucy.

"She's been on the stage," thought G.G. while he responded, "We often have to trace a person before we can watch or follow them."

"Yes. I see. Now one more question before I begin. When talking confidentially to an enquiry agent, can you be had up for slander or anything?"

"Nothing," G.G. assured her, "is ever repeated against a client's interest."

"That's most satisfactory, Mr. Gem. Then I want you to trace, please, a bloody blackguard who has gone off with a lot of my money."

Empty, unwashed-up tumbler on small table. Probably contained a pick-me-up.

"Can I have the particulars?" asked G.G., patiently.

"Here they are," replied Lucy, "and I think you'll agree that they are gory! The individual is supposed to be named Bloggs, but I'll bet that's not the name on his birth certificate. Edward P. Bloggs. I don't know what the P. stands for, but I could make it something! He advertised for a sleeping partner with some capital, and like a fool I answered the advertisement. He came to see me here in this flat, and I'm bound to say he seemed nice enough, in fact he was so nice that I sometimes think he must now have turned into someone else. I don't mean that I fell for him, but he had

a pleasant easy direct manner, and there was no doubt, no doubt at all, that my two thousand pounds would be doubled in six months."

G.G. nodded. He recognised the formula.

"What was the business?" he enquired.

"It called itself Spare Parts Limited," answered Lucy.
"Have you ever heard of it?"

"No."

"Then you've lost your chance, because now you never will. Mr. Bloggs has walked out on me and his staff, and where he's walked to is what you've got to find out."

She made a dramatic gesture and then leaned back in her chair, as though to say, "Now it's *your* turn."

"I shall require a few more particulars," said G.G.

"There aren't any more," replied Lucy.

"I expect I shall find some if you will answer a few questions. What is the address of Spare Parts Limited?"

"Not 156, Rolliter Way, Balham, as I was first told. It's—wait a moment, I wrote it down somewhere—yes, 3, Partington Wall, E.C."

G.G. entered it in his notebook.

"I suppose you were given the wrong address deliberately."

"Well, yes, of course."

"When did you find out?"

"A few days ago, when I called—or tried to."

"Only a few days ago?"

"Yes. I was beginning to get the wind up."

"And Mr. Bloggs was not at that address?"

"Nor was anybody else! There isn't any such address. It was the same with the solicitors."

"What solicitors?"

"Messrs. Swallow, Bird and Swallow. Have you ever heard of them?"

G.G. shook his head.

"I don't expect anyone else has, either. *Their* address was

supposed to be 66, Tabard Inn, W.C.2, but *that* doesn't exist, either."

"But what were your dealings with Swallow, Bird and Swallow?" enquired G.G., wondering why God had made the world so easy a place for sharks to live in. "Did the transaction go through them?"

"Yes," answered Lucy, trying not to look ashamed. "He—Mr. Bloggs—said I would need a solicitor, and he sent one to me next day——"

"Here? To your flat?"

"Yes. Why not?"

G.G. smiled faintly.

"There was no reason why not," he remarked, "from Mr. Bloggs's point of view. Did *all* the transactions take place here?"

"Did they?" murmured Lucy. "Yes. They must have."

"Because there wasn't anywhere else—anywhere else at all—where they could have taken place?"

"Only at Mr. Bloggs's hotel, as the other addresses didn't exist. Yes, I know quite well I've been a fool, Mr. Gem, and deserve to have lost all I have, but your job is to pretend I'm just a victim of bad luck."

"The hotel does exist, though?"

"Yes, Wray's Hotel, Baker Street."

"And that is Mr. Bloggs's last known address?"

Lucy nodded.

"He was to have moved to 19a, Fenner Crescent, W.2., the day after tomorrow, but—but——"

"Yes?"

"That doesn't exist, either."

"Quite. Now when did Mr. Bloggs leave Wray's Hotel?"

"I think it was Thursday. It may have been Friday. Thursday or Friday. Yes, Friday or Thursday. Anyhow, they'll tell you if you call. Do you know, my head is beginning to spin, is yours?"

"No, ma'am, to me the situation is becoming plainer and plainer. Wray's Hotel will probably be the best base for my next enquiries, but you can still help me a little more, if you will. These solicitors——"

"It was one of the Swallows who called," interrupted Lucy, with a sudden longing to get it all over. The interview with Jerry Haines had been much more agreeable. Probably because there she had been a fool among fools, while now she lacked mental company. "I made my cheque out to him——"

"What is your bank?"

"The National Provincial."

"Thank you. Yes?"

"What? Oh, Swallow. He called here, and he had a long moustache and side whiskers."

"Was Mr. Bloggs clean shaven?"

Lucy sighed.

"I see you are wondering what *I've* been wondering! It's a horrible thought!" She shuddered at herself. "Oh, no! Surely not! It couldn't really and truly have been the same person! Not really and truly!"

"I doubt it, ma'am," answered G.G., to her relief. "That risk would have been too great, although Mr. Bloggs is obviously a man who takes risks. But you would probably have recognised the voice, if not the face, quite leaving out the figure——"

"Oh, yes, the figure *was* different! I'm sure of it! At least, I think it was. And so was the voice—oh, yes—although, of course, one can change one's voice rather more easily than one's figure, can't one?"

"We shall probably find," said G.G., "that the alleged Mr. Swallow was an accomplice of Mr. Bloggs, working possibly on a commission basis. I shall not trouble you much more just now, ma'am, but before I go I do need as detailed a description of these two men—assuming them to have been

two men—as you can possibly supply. Now, then. First Mr. Bloggs.”

He held his pencil poised over his notebook, and Lucy did her best. And when at last George Gem left her, she leaned back in her chair, and wondered whether it was all worth while. “Because, even if we get Mr. Bloggs,” she reflected, “what are we going to do with him?” It was highly unlikely that he would still have her two thousand pounds in returnable form, and, vile though he was, the prospect of sending him to prison for several years did not give Lucy Clover any particular pleasure.

The second visitor of the day was Jerry Haines. He called just as she was finishing a solitary, gloomy tea, and she welcomed him graciously. He was a nice, ingenuous young man, and she was in a mood for something agreeable to take unpleasant tastes out of her mouth.

“I hope you’ve brought me some news?” she said, hopefully.

“Well, as a matter of fact, I have,” answered Jerry.

Her heart leapt.

“Have you found him?”

“Who? Oh, Bloggs!” He shook his head. “No, I’m afraid not. I’ve a hunch we never will.”

Lucy smiled disappointedly, but she said, “Don’t give up hope, Mr. Haines. *I’ve* a hunch that we’re going to.” She lowered her voice dramatically and unnecessarily. “There’s a sleuth on the track!”

“A sleuth?”

“Yes, a detective.”

Jerry looked surprised.

“Do you mean the police are after him already?”

“Well, no, not the police exactly—yet. It’s a private detective. I’ve engaged him. He was here only a couple of hours ago filling his notebook with particulars. So that’s *my* news, and now what is yours? Tell me over a luke-warm cup of tea.”

While unfolding his story Jerry watched his hostess anxiously for her reactions. The project did not depend upon her, for it had been agreed that if the new staff could not turn up in full force, six-sevenths of the complete complement would be sufficient to go on with, but there was something about Mrs. Clover, something he could not quite define, which Jerry felt would add useful ballast to the ship. He had tried to define it unsuccessfully on his way to her flat. That she could be exceedingly foolish had been amply proved. Yes, she could match them all in financial folly! But—what? She had enterprise. She did not sit down under her punishment, however deserved. She had exploded non-existent addresses, if somewhat tardy in the process, she had tracked a genuine one through Telephone Enquiries. She had bearded the staff of Spare Parts Limited in their den with formidable if fictitious ferocity, and now she had engaged a private detective to chase Mr. Bloggs. Coupled with something engagingly amusing in her personality, this was not bad going.

But Jerry had not really expected in his heart that Lucy Clover would do more than listen to his tale with polite interest, and he was genuinely astonished when she exclaimed:

"I must say, it sounds delightful!"

"You don't mean that?" he answered.

"Of course I do! A real adventure! And those two funny old people must be a scream!" She paused, as though doubting her term. "Or do I mean quite that?"

"They seem rather nice to me," said Jerry. "I know they got under Tim O'Hara's skin. And—and that old house in the middle of a small private park sounds rather jolly, too."

"Yes, doesn't it?"

"And, of course, if the whole thing turned out too ridiculous or impossible, we'd only have to stick it for a month."

"Quite true."

There was a pause. Regarding him curiously, she asked, "And are you all really and truly going, then?"

"We are. Are you?"

Jerry often wondered what her reply would have been if, at that moment, the telephone bell had not rung. He watched her lift the receiver, he noticed the sudden change in her expression, he saw her eyebrows (rather surprisingly they were her own eyebrows) go up, and he heard her say, at the conclusion of a period of intense listening, "Yes, I see—yes, very interesting—yes, I will be." Then she replaced the receiver, with the oddest expression.

"I'm joining your party," she said.





CHAPTER VI

NORTH-WEST PASSAGE

IT WAS, when they all came to think of it—and they all did think of it as O'Hara's ancient car began, at midday next day, to move north-westwards—a most astonishing exodus. It was astonishing not merely on account of its objective, but of its suddenness.

Departure at such short notice had only been possible because none of the seven emigrants had any encumbrances. There may have been two or three surprised or disturbed landladies on learning that they were to lose their lodgers so abruptly, and Robert Tonsil's mother had submitted her youngest to a careful cross-examination before withdrawing objections. Bob was hardly of marrying age, but silly adolescent boys did elope with silly adolescent girls occasionally, and Mrs. Tonsil had read of a most shocking case only a few days before. Fifteen and sixteen they were, who'd believe it, and they'd gone off with the housekeeping money. But Bob had been able to clear himself of any amatory intentions; Smith had told the sister he lived with that he'd probably be back before long, and if not what about trying to let his room—temporary of course, Lil, because he wanted somewhere to come back to if he got fed up; and all Lucy Clover had had to do was to turn the key of her flat.

And so, by the kindness of circumstances aided here and there by well-engineered persuasion, here were our seven adventurers heading towards Barnet in an alarmingly over-packed car.

"I take it—er—that your car *can* stand the whole lot of us, Mr. O'Hara?" murmured Fingleton, wedged tightly between Lucy and Jerry.

"The more immediately pressing question is what *we* can stand," remarked Jerry.

"Pressing's right, chaps," agreed Madeleine. "I feel like the ham in the sandwich!"

Tim O'Hara laughed from the driving seat.

"Ye've no need to worry," he called. "'Tis only a matter of a hundred and eighty miles."

"A hundred and eighty miles?" cried Madeleine. "Ye gods, have I got to be squashed by two fat people and three suitcases for a hundred and eighty miles?"

"Well, I ain't fat," squeaked Tonsil. "It's worse, miss, for a small 'un!"

Nevertheless, they reached Barnet without casualties, and ten miles later, as they rattled through St. Albans—rattled was the correct word, for a loose portion of the bonnet lived in a state of perpetual agitation, while some undiscoverable area in the rear of the car was constantly throwing temperaments—they were still intact, although Fingleton was secretly suffering. They formed an unusual Sunday sight as they went by the cathedral, not because cars are rare on the Sabbath, but because this one seemed to be sprouting luggage and limbs to the accompaniment of a hidden tin orchestra. Churchgoers of the ancient city may have wondered whether anything more strange had passed through since the tenth century.

Beyond St. Albans, O'Hara tried to divert the thoughts of his oppressed passengers from the present to the past.

"If you're interested in history now," he said, "ye'll like to know that we are on the old Roman road of Watling Street."

"Don't you mean Rattling Street?" asked Madeleine rudely.

"That's not quite fair to the Romans," Jerry pointed out. "It's not the street that is rattling."

"Ah!" shouted Fingleton.

"What?" cried everyone.

"Cramp!" gasped Fingleton.

O'Hara stopped the car, and in a blessed silence four of the passengers got out to give the sufferer recovering space, and also to deal with their own symptoms. In a large field beyond a gate cattle browsed, and a lark sang high in the air. After the confinement of the car, life became wonderfully free and spacious. The edges of the field were gay with buttercups and daisies. Looking over the gate, Lucy spied a small clump of trees close to the hedge.

"Wouldn't this be a good place for lunch?" she proposed.

All agreed, though so far they had only covered twenty-five miles. Food would fortify them for their return to cramped quarters, provided, as O'Hara warningly pointed out, they did not increase their collective bulk by eating too much. Tonsil was sent over the gate first, to shoo off the cows. When he proved unsuccessful, for the cows shooed off him, Smith went to his assistance, and by the time the rest followed with paper bags and bottles the space beneath the trees had been cleared. The displaced cows watched furtively while the usurpers ate. Oh, for a knightly bull to dismay the enemy and prove the prowess of the quadruped! But, happily for the bipeds, the only Sir Galahad in the district was chained by its nose to a post, and the munching of ham sandwiches and the drinking of gingerbeer out of the bottle were interrupted by no heroic bovine incidents.

"This," reflected Smith, unused to the country, "is a bit of all right."

Madeleine, lying on her back and staring up into the limitless blue, heard O'Hara's voice in her ear. He, less picturesquely, was lying on his stomach.

"A penny for your thoughts," he said. "Or would that be a basement bargain?"

"It wouldn't be a bargain at any price," answered Madeleine. "I wasn't thinking of anything."

"Sure, I wish I could do it," replied O'Hara, "but something always comes."

"Then you can earn the penny. What were *you* thinking of?"

"Ah, now what was I thinking of," said O'Hara, searching for a substitute for the truth. He had been thinking of the curve of Madeleine's neck. "It was that little lark, singing up there so happily."

"Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could all do it!"

"We'd look a bit silly if we did."

"Idiot!" she giggled.

"And, then," interposed Jerry, edging closer, "how do we know larks really are happy?"

"Man!" exclaimed O'Hara. "Don't you know your Shelley?"

"Yes, and I also know my Huxley," retorted Jerry. "Ever read *Point Counter Point*?"

Jerry had only read a few pages himself, but they happened to have been the pages in which skylarks were debunked.

Fingleton cleared his throat. He was sitting on a stinging-nettle some little distance off, but voices carried in this clear air, and while the country always made him feel poetic he had an instinct for accuracy with which poets are rarely troubled. He was forced therefore to side against the angels. Jerry, it should be mentioned, usually chose the angels, but he was now taking sides against Tim O'Hara for occupying the place by Madeleine he had wanted himself.

"It's a curious thing," said Fingleton, "that many things are not what they seem. I don't expect one can really say if larks are happy or not, but—er—well, take the blueness of the sky, for instance. It looks blue to us, yes, admittedly, but on the moon it would look black."

This depressed everybody. Madeleine tried to save the situation by asking, "Yes, but how do we know the moon is right?"

Fingleton blinked at the frivolous twist. If he perceived the frivolity, he was more concerned with its sober implication. How did one know? Yes, indeed, how *did* one know? It was disturbing.

"True, we don't," he admitted. "After all, I suppose the only thing you can ever really count on is mathematics."

This cast the company into such utter gloom that a move was suggested, and they trooped back to the car, while the cows trooped back to the spot from which they had been evacuated.

Passing through Dunstable, O'Hara informed them that the place was famous for straw plaiting.

"I thought it was oysters," said Smith.

"That's Whitstable," O'Hara corrected him.

At Stony Stratford he pointed out the market place, ignoring the fact that it was self-evident. At Northampton he drew attention to the Eleanor Cross. At Market Harborough he sang out:

"Here one hunts."

"Is this a Cook's Tour?" enquired Madeleine.

"No, I'm just practising," answered O'Hara, "in case I lose my job at Cresswell Hall and have to find another!"

A dozen miles farther on he announced:

"We are now approaching the important city of Leicester."

"Could you make it a spot more interesting this time?" begged Madeleine.

"Sure I can," answered O'Hara. "In Leicester there is a wonderful teashop that's open on Sundays."

For the first time his information was welcomed. They were even more ready for tea than they had been for lunch. Quite apart from the discomfort of being packed like sardines, and of certain new tricks which the car was developing, more than one member of the company was growing a little anxious as to the result of this mad enterprise, and wondering whether it might have been wiser, as well as more

immediately comfortable, to have dropped out. What was it that had lured them from the orthodox path? Why were they taking up domestic service, for that was just what it amounted to however romantic the circumstances, instead of pursuing their normal avocations? Was it the persuasiveness of an Irishman, or the elusive glamour of the unknown—or were they all simply straws in the tide which draws us willy-nilly to success or failure?

The teashop was in a side street, and mellowed sunlight came into it through pink curtains. "How did you come to know of it?" asked Lucy.

"Oh, 'tis one of me comfort corners," answered O'Hara. "Travellers need 'em afther a bad day's business—you know, when everybody just hates the sight of you with your little brown bag!" They all laughed. Conversation woke up and became gay. But beneath the gaiety O'Hara sensed the uneasiness, and on the point of demolishing his third *éclair* he suddenly paused.

"There's still time to turn back," he said, "if we want to."

"Is there?" murmured Fingleton.

"But who wants to?" asked Madeleine.

"Dealing with the first question first," answered O'Hara, "there is plenty of time. I can get you back to London for the nine o'clock news."

"Without any disrespect to your car," retorted Madeleine, "I doubt it. Perhaps, for tomorrow night's news!"

"Anyhow, it would be letting the Old Folks down," added Jerry, making a virtue of it. "We couldn't do that."

"They wouldn't be let down far," replied O'Hara, confidently, "for this is how I look at it. If we're not happy there we'll be no good to them, and they'll be better off findin' others in our place. As a matter of fact—I didn't tell ye—they were just about to put the matter in the hands of an agent who'd called only an hour before me. Faith,

I was only just in time. But we can send them a wire in the mornin', or today if they deliver on Sundays——"

"You're wasting your breath, Tim," interrupted Madeleine.

"I agree," chimed in Lucy. "I wouldn't go back for a farm!"

O'Hara looked relieved, but his eyes strayed to Fingleton, whose attitude had most markedly betrayed anxiety. Forced by O'Hara's gaze to the issue, Fingleton explained that though he had endured certain moments of doubt—yes, he admitted it—and was still a little dubious as to how the matter would eventuate—it was best to be quite frank, was it not?—a contract was, to his mind, a contract, whether signed or merely verbal, and there could be no doubt—indeed, could there?—that Sir Walter and Lady Cresswell expected them and would be seriously inconvenienced if they did not turn up. Which being the case, there seemed only one honourable, as well as possibly sensible, course to pursue.

It had been a good move of O'Hara's to challenge shadowy doubts and bring them into the open, where they dissolved into thin air. Now those doubts were settled, morale was completely restored. After tea everything conspired to increase their contented mood and to allay their fears of life without wireless.

The late afternoon sun produced its black magic of lengthened shadows. Birds piped up after their siesta. Loughborough and Derby were passed without any references to their trades, their churches, or their histories, and beyond Derby, continuing north-westwards, the scenery became so glorious that cramped positions and the car's eccentricities were forgotten in the contemplation of England at her loveliest. There was joy in the sparkling river that kept them company, peace in the perfect greenness of the fields and meadows, happy adventure in the enfolding hills. Already most of the party felt cut off from the rapid tempo

of modern life. Here were more slowly-moving currents, that lapped the soul, and strengthened forgotten beliefs.

Their moods were reflected in their silence. Bright conversation seemed out of place. Smith thought of his sister in a dingy back street, probably sewing at that moment by the red geranium. "I'd like Lil to be here," he thought. "I must send her a picture postcard."

"Why didn't you tell us this was the tops?" exclaimed Madeleine, suddenly.

"Sure, didn't I?" answered O'Hara. "But 'tis a good idea to find out some things for oneself."

"A philosopher, as well as an historian!" commented Lucy.

"But we've yet to learn," added Jerry, "whether he's a cook!"

"Is Cresswell as lovely as this, Tim?" enquired Madeleine.

"Ah, beauty's a matter of opinion, is it not, now? Once I saw a man hug a girl who'd have made me run a mile! But, sure, I told ye I fell in love with it?"

"I 'ope there's woods," said Tonsil. "I'm good at climbin' trees. Once I climbed to the top of a whopper after a monkey fer a lidy."

"You'll find plenty of trees, me lad," O'Hara promised, "but I'm not guaranteein' the monkey."

Tonsil grinned, then grew solemn as the moment seemed ripe for a question that had been bothering him. He had not joined much in the conversation. In the office of Spare Parts Limited he had never been bashful. Office-boy tradition had been behind him. But all this was new, and he felt a little out of his depth.

"Wot's Odd Jobs, ezackly?" he asked. "Jest cleanin' boots, ain't it?"

"You'll find it more than that," replied O'Hara, with a wink. "Cleanin' boots and cleanin' knives, gettin' in the wood and the coal, lookin' after the coke-boiler, helpin' with the washin' up, helpin' with all the other housework,

helpin' in the garden, answerin' bells, runnin' errands, doin' shoppin', seein' to the lamps, workin' the well, feedin' the chickens, puttin' the cat out——"

"Oi! That's enough!" interrupted Tonsil. "Yer can tell me the rest another time!"

Tea over, they covered the last stage of that day's journey, reaching Matlock Bath just before gloaming. Here, at another of O'Hara's "comfort corners," they ate beef and pickles, and retired early to fortify themselves with a good night's rest before the ordeals of the morrow. Next morning, in bright sunshine, they completed their way through green and peaceful vales to Cresswell Hall.



CHAPTER VII

SIR WALTER AND LADY CRESSWELL

AFTER passing through the lodge gate—they were rather surprised that the lodge showed no sign of life and they had to open the gate themselves—and concluding their journey along a tree-lined drive, they were admitted to the Hall by a very young maid with sandy hair, freckles, large frankly-curious eyes, and a mouth moulded to stay open.

"Are you the new ones?" asked the maid.

"We are," answered Jerry.

The maid stared at them with a slightly awed expression, then said, "This way," led them into the long-windowed, blue-curtained drawing-room which they recognised from O'Hara's description, and told them to sit down and wait. Slightly awed themselves, they sat down on seven chairs that had been arranged for them in a semi-circle, their gaze speculatively fixed on two other chairs as yet unoccupied facing them with throne-like effect. When a rustle at the door announced that the vacant chairs were about to be occupied, seven heads twisted round galvanically, as though worked by the pull of a single string, and Sir Walter and Lady Cresswell walked sedately into the room. As Jerry rose to his feet, he had an odd sensation that somebody ought to have been playing *God Save the King*. Or did he mean *God Save the Queen*?

O'Hara had described them as octogenarians, and certainly neither of them looked under eighty. Sir Walter had no hair, and Lady Cresswell's was thin and white. Both had sticks obviously designed to assist their progress, but whereas Sir Walter's back was slightly bent, Lady Cresswell's had so far defied the curvatures of time and was surprisingly erect.

This in some queer way seemed to accentuate her frailty by drawing attention to her defiance. But these two staunch Victorians made no artificial effort to camouflage their age. There was nothing in their bearing to suggest that the accumulation of years was a disgrace to be hidden. Rather was it an honour to be proclaimed, like a high score in cricket. Admittedly, had they wished to conceal their age they would have been hard put to it.

"You may sit down," said Lady Cresswell, as she and her consort hobbled to their chairs.

It was less of a concession than a command, delivered in a voice of surprising firmness. The string had been pulled again, and the new staff sat down. Then there was another short silence, during which, now seated themselves, Sir Walter and Lady Cresswell surveyed their seven retainers. More than one of the seven felt that the situation would have been easier if—not outwardly, but in secret—they could have laughed at the ridiculous old couple, so clearly anachronistic to the year they lived in. But derisive amusement would itself have been an anachronism. Moreover, though they did not consciously realise this at the time, it would have deprived the situation of its only hope.

"I am glad to see that you are punctual," said Sir Walter, at last.

His voice was not quite as firm as his wife's, but it bore a quality that was not to be trifled with.

"Yes, that is a good beginning," nodded Lady Cresswell. "A very good beginning. Young persons of today are apt to regard unpunctuality as a sign of independence, but we are always punctual at Cresswell Hall. I hope you will all bear this in mind."

Madeleine found the old lady's eyes upon her. They were tired eyes, but the light in them was live and active.

"We will do our best, Lady Cresswell, you may be sure," answered Madeleine.

"I am sure you will," agreed the old lady. "The customary mode of address is 'my lady,' but of course you are none of you experienced in service yet—so I understand—and naturally I shall make allowances. Indeed," she added, with a glance at her husband, "your lack of experience may, in the circumstances, be an advantage."

"They will certainly have less to unlearn," said Sir Walter.

"Precisely." Now Lady Cresswell glanced at O'Hara. "Do they all understand the circumstances?"

"As well as I understand them meself," answered O'Hara.

"Perhaps I had better repeat them, so that everything will be perfectly clear."

"No, I will repeat them," interposed Sir Walter, and suddenly glared at his audience. "We hate noise, we hate speed, we hate motor-cars, we hate aeroplanes, we hate immorality, we hate bad manners—in fact, we hate what is popularly called Progress and we're not going to have any more of it! We mean to end up as we began—to have one more spell before the Lord takes us from the life we were born into!"

His indignant eyes were directed towards Jerry Haines, who felt he was expected to say something, and made the mistake of trying to be intelligent.

"We sympathise with you perfectly, sir," he answered, "though, of course, nothing can remain quite stationary—I mean, things have to move——"

He broke off, with an uneasy feeling that he was about to be withered.

"Move? Move? Of course things have to move!" snapped Sir Walter. "But there is a—a biological speed-limit! It has taken green scum eighty million years to evolve into ^{us}—that may not be anything for green scum to boast about, but at least no one can accuse it of hurrying! In ^{another} eighty years, let alone the millions, what are *we* going to

evolve into? At the rate we are going? And with nobody to gong us!"

His eyes were now on Smith.

"Well, there you are," said Smith, without the slightest idea where anybody was. But he spoke sincerely.

"And now I think I had better tell you some of our arrangements," went on Lady Cresswell, briskly. "You all know the positions you have been engaged to occupy?"

In virtue of her own position, Lucy Clover took it on herself to reply.

"Yes, my lady," she answered. "Mr. O'Hara showed us the list. I am the housekeeper, and although I have never kept any house before but my own, I shall endeavour to give every satisfaction."

For a few moments Lady Cresswell regarded the speaker speculatively. Though the old lady's eyes were tired, they were exceedingly shrewd. Then she said:

"I believe you *are* going to give satisfaction, Mrs. Clover. I have the hope that you all are. If not—well, a month quickly passes—more quickly for us, perhaps, than for you. Now you, Mrs. Clover, will of course have control of the indoor arrangements. I used to take a personal interest in these arrangements myself—indeed, when I was a girl the successful running of a home, from the nursery down to the broom-cupboard, entitled a woman to the highest respect—but now I am afraid I have to leave everything to others. Until you are familiar with things here, you will find Jane invaluable. Jane is the girl who opened the door to you, and is the only member of our old indoor staff still with us. She is kitchen-housemaid, and will help wherever she is needed. She will, of course, help you, Mr. O'Hara, in the kitchen. By the way, we must decide what I am going to call you."

"Thru, Mr. O'Hara would not be appropriate to me position," agreed O'Hara, "and I'll not be expectin' ye to

call me Tim till you're sure of me pastry. Should it be Cook, now?"

There was an audacity in the response which only the Irishman could have risked, and for a moment his fate seemed to totter in the balance. Sir Walter's shaggy eyebrows went up—God had left him his eyebrows—and Lady Cresswell looked surprised. But a faint smile came into her face as she replied:

"Yes, Cook it shall be, and perhaps it had better remain so even if your pastry proves satisfactory."

"You can cook, I take it?" enquired Sir Walter, rather acidly.

"It's tremblin' I'd be if I couldn't," O'Hara answered with perfect truth. "Me father ran a hotel in Ballyhoosh."

Lady Cresswell turned back to Lucy Clover.

"I think we ought to run over the routine," she said. "I believe in early rising for all young people, not only for their health, but for the day's work. Jane rises at six. But provided the work is done efficiently and not scamped, Mrs. Clover can fix what rising arrangements she chooses. Your breakfast is at eight. Ours is at nine. Sir Walter and I do not take early tea, but we have our breakfast brought up to our rooms. This will obviate the necessity of laying a breakfast table for us, and there are at present no other members of the family living here. We are usually down by a little after ten, but you had better say ten, by which time we expect the hall and downstairs rooms to be swept and dusted, and the flowers arranged. We like flowers. It is the gardener's job, of course, to see that we never run short of them. . . . Yes, Mr. Fingleton?"

For Fingleton had cleared his throat in unconscious response to this allusion to himself. He had not intended to say anything, but now discovered that he was expected to.

"I—er—hope my lady will let me know if she has any favourite species," he murmured.

By good luck he seemed to have said the right thing. Lady Cresswell smiled kindly at him.

"I like all flowers," she answered. "Hydrangias, dahlias, marigolds—though their petals do drop when brought into the house unless they are always kept fresh—canterbury bells. Roses, of course . . . I hope you like roses, too."

"If I may say so, they are almost a passion with me," declared Fingleton, suddenly discovering that he was happy.

"Then I hope you will keep the rose-beds weeded and free of cigarette-ends! The yellow rose-bed is a disgrace! Now, where are we?"

"Ten o'clock, my lady," Lucy reminded her.

"Oh, yes. Thank you. By that time the canaries' cages must have been seen to, and the goldfish fed. The goldfish tank is in the conservatory. I hope you will make sure, Mrs. Clover, that no dusters or brooms are left about. We are strongly opposed to that sort of thing. One morning last week when I came down I found in the hall a dustpan, a lip-stick, and a mule."

"A mule?" exclaimed Smith, forgetful of manners in his astonishment. "Go on!"

The exclamation brought Sir Walter out of a semi-doze. It was a condition, easily achieved and as easily shed, in which he never missed anything that was going on. The declutched mind could resume its progress instantaneously in top gear.

"The mule my wife refers to," he explained—for the moment Lady Cresswell seemed incapable of explaining herself—"is not a quadruped but a bedroom slipper which sprouts green feathers."

"Oh!" murmured Smith, and decided not to speak again for a long while.

"I will see that nothing is left about, my lady," promised Lucy, hastily.

"Please do," replied Lady Cresswell. "The lip-stick I

thought particularly objectionable. It may not surprise you to hear that I am not very partial to make-up, believing we should go through life with at least some approximation to the face God gave us."

"Do you forbid all make-up here?" asked Madeleine anxiously, trying not to feel like a whore.

"No, I do not forbid it," answered Lady Cresswell, "but I cannot say that I care for it during working hours. It seems to me that make-up, unless used to conceal some temporary blemish, should be reserved for appropriate occasions, and even then should only be used in moderation. The staff lunch is at half-past twelve. The family lunch is at half-past one. The ordering and catering I leave to you, Mrs. Clover, but of course you can always consult me about anything you wish. To save work today, Jane has prepared a cold lunch for us all. After lunch Sir Walter and I retire to our rooms to rest. We are not to be disturbed between lunch and tea on any account, and of course are not at home then to visitors. The staff tea is at four, our tea at half-past. Tea is served here or in the garden, according to the weather. But today we will have it inside. By that time the maids should be in their afternoon dresses." A faint smile touched her lips. "I hope you will like the dresses. Naturally we provide those, and you will find everything you need—all of you—in the store-room, which Jane can show you. Our last parlour-maid, Miss Trent, brought her own costumes, which were really more suited, we thought, to a musical comedy." Her eyes dropped for a moment to a list in her hand. "You won't object if I call you Madeleine?"

"Of course not," answered Madeleine. "Why should I?"

"You shouldn't, but you might," replied Lady Cresswell. "Madeleine is a pretty name. I quite like it. Staff dinner at seven, ours at eight. We dress, of course, for dinner. The butler and the parlourmaid wait on us. We shall not

do much entertaining. The most likely callers will be the vicar and Dr. Orvil, for a chat or a game of chess. My husband is a very good chess player."

The word "chess" brought Sir Walter back to full attention.

"Do you play, Haines?" he asked Jerry.

"I know the moves, sir," responded Jerry.

"Good! One evening we must have a game. . . . Have you finished, my dear?"

"I only had to add," concluded Lady Cresswell, "that we do not stay up late, and we like all the lights to be out by eleven."

Sir Walter grunted his approval.

"Yes, we believe in early hours," he said. "In fact, we believe in nearly all the things the present generation doesn't—good manners, good taste, good conversation—ah, there's a lost art! Young people of today learn half-a-dozen cheap phrases and use them over and over again for all occasions. They think they're smart, when the truth is they're too lazy to study the dictionary! You've had it—you've said it—they couldn't care less—it's the tops! Horrible! Mass-production mentality! However!" He turned to Jerry. "Of course, the duties Lady Cresswell has been talking about do not apply to you. We'll go into your own duties later. But there's one I can tell you now—you'll have to find me a new lodge-keeper."

"I thought your lodge-keeper was staying," answered Jerry.

"He was, but he changed his mind, and went off with the others. I imagine Bella—our late parlourmaid—had something to do with it. It's a nuisance, because he was our coachman, as well. Yes, and unless you are very tactful, Fingleton, we may lose our under-gardeners, too. Benson did his level best to take them away with him."

"The lodge-keeper, sir?"

"What, Benson? No, that was Hawke. Benson is—was—the head gardener—to whose habit of adorning the flower-beds with cigarette-ends my wife has referred. I suppose you smoke, Fingleton?"

"Well, sir, in moderation," replied Fingleton, deciding to cut his six cigarettes a day down to three, and to pinch the ends out and deposit them in his pocket.

"In moderation? Good! Cigarettes in moderation has a pleasant, unusual sound, though personally I think England would be a better country if it stuck to cigars." He paused, and glanced at Lady Cresswell. "Well? I think that's all, for the moment?"

"Unless they have any questions they would like to ask," said Lady Cresswell.

Madeleine had one. Anxiety made her bold. She was beginning to wonder, in spite of a queer fascination that was creeping over her, whether there would be any moments at Cresswell Hall when they would be able to call their souls their own. The fascination might not last.

"There's one thing you haven't mentioned, my lady," she ventured.

"Yes? What is that?" enquired Lady Cresswell.

"I suppose—do we have any time off?"

"Oh, yes! Your nights out," answered Lady Cresswell. "The usual arrangement. One evening a week, and one afternoon every fortnight." The information was met with a rather chilly silence, and for the first time Lady Cresswell looked a little unsure of herself. Or was she unsure of the new staff? "You will not find very much to do here when you are off duty," she added. "I expect you all realised this when you accepted the engagement. But provided the work gets done, and the house is run in the way we require, you can make your own arrangements. We want you all to be happy."

"Thank you, my lady."

"Not at all. If you look after us, I think you will find that we shall look after you."

After another little silence, this time 'not so chilly, Sir Walter rose from his chair, bringing the new staff up with him, gave a stiff little bow, winced, and suddenly sat down again. The new staff bowed in return, and filed solemnly out of the room.

"Back to Victoria with a vengeance!" thought Madeleine. "I wonder if we're all going to stand it?"





CHAPTER VIII

JANE

IF MADELEINE'S wonder whether they would succumb to boredom was shared by any other members of the new staff as they sat down to their cold lunch in the servants' parlour, it was because they were ignorant of certain intrusions destined shortly to disturb the strange serenity of Cresswell Hall, basking in the mellowness of a former age; but two members at least had, by now, no doubts at all.

One of these was he who had embarked upon the adventure with the greatest trepidation. William Fingleton was not an adventurer by nature, being quite unaware that an ancestor of his, William le Flengelon, had distinguished himself at Crecy by unhorsing two Englishmen and successfully galloping away from a third. Prior to the present enterprise the only really bold thing he had ever done in his life was to marry, and on the eve of his departure from London he had experienced qualms similar to those on the eve of his departure from bachelorhood. But now he felt supremely happy. A new world was opening to him, a dream-world of roses and bird-baths and strangely-clipped hedges—he had caught a glimpse of a small topiary garden from a window, and he could hardly wait to discover whether one of the shapes was a hen or a cupid. And he himself—William Fingleton, clerk, of no account—was to be lord of this world, and although he knew he was not qualified for the position, he contemplated it with a strange, illogical confidence. Part of this confidence was due to the attitude towards him of the little old lady who, like himself, loved flowers. It would be a pleasure to work for her, it would, indeed.

The other completely contented one was Robert Tonsil.

This contentment had nothing to do with Lady Cresswell, who rather alarmed him. The cause was the kitchen-housemaid, Jane. Jane had freckles. He had a few himself. Jane was about his own age. If a year or two more, what did that matter? She had a big-eyed way of looking at you and laughing at nothing that was both pleasant and confusing. You couldn't get away from it, Jane was a good-looker. Nice in that clean print dress . . . Tonsil wondered what his mother would have thought of Jane.

Tonsil was not alone in his appreciation of the kitchen-housemaid. As soon as the new staff had trooped out of the drawing-room she had darted forward from a dim spot suspiciously near the door and taken them all under her wing. First she had shown them up to their bedrooms. The rooms of all but Jerry were on the rambling top floor, and Madeleine was relieved to find that she had a small one to herself. Lucy, O'Hara and Fingleton also had single rooms, but Smith and Tonsil were to share an enormous sloping attic. Next Jane pointed out the linen cupboards, the bathrooms, the closets, the storeroom where they would find appropriate clothing—"there's ever so much," she assured them, "you'll lack for nothing"—and a locked room on the first floor that nobody was allowed to enter. "If it's locked how could anyone enter it?" enquired Jerry. "There's them that's tried," answered Jane, darkly. And now, the preliminary tour concluded down a winding back staircase, they were eating a lavish cold lunch and listening to Jane talk.

"We want you to tell us all the low-down," said Madeleine.

"Better not let the missus hear you call it that," answered Jane, solemnly. "Slang's what's called taboo."

"Surely not in the basement—if that *was* slang?"

"Well, see, if you talk it in one place, you'll do it in the next. Lady Cresswell said to me only yesterday, 'Jane,' she said, 'when Bella goes I hope you'll get back to talking nice

like you used to.' Honestly, some of the awful things Bella said was as catching as measles! But, of course, it wasn't only their talk, it was their going's on—and not only them, neither!"

They waited breathlessly for details, but Jane disappointed them. After a pause, she merely said, "I expect one thing is that Sir Walter and Lady Cresswell, being so old, haven't moved with the times like—well, like Wac and his crowd."

"Wac?" queried Jerry.

"There I go! Using his nickname like all the others did!"

"Yes, but who is Wac?"

"Oh, he's Mr. Arthur, Sir Walter's grandson. See, his name's Walter Arthur Cresswell, and it's his initials. He gets the title when Sir Walter dies—my goodness, fancy *him* a baronet!—but p'r'aps that's all he *will* get after the row! See, Sir Walter had his solicitor come here a couple of days after they'd all been packed off—I know because I opened the door to him, and you can tell a solicitor same as a sweep—and I said to myself, 'Jane, I bet he's something to do with the will'!"

"Sure, Jane, your conversation gets more and more entertainin'!" exclaimed O'Hara. "Tell us about this row?"

"No, wait a moment," interposed Madeleine. "Tell us first why *you* opened the door? Is that your job or mine? We might as well learn as we go along."

"Or Smith's," added Lucy. "I had an idea butlers opened doors."

"Well, if we're keeping to the same rule," replied Jane, "I do generally in the mornings, when mostly it don't matter, and the parlourmaid and the butler share it in the afternoons, according to how things are."

"I see. That seems an excellent arrangement," nodded Lucy. "We'll keep to it. And the solicitor came in the morning?"

"What, Mr. Druitt? No, in the afternoon."

"Oh! Then why did you open the door to him?"

"Well, there you are! Bella used to say rules was made to be broken! I expect she and Mr. Trimm was too busy spooning round the pond, so after the bell had gone three times I thought I'd better do something."

"Ah, enough o' these domestic details!" exclaimed O'Hara. "'Tis the row we want to hear of! When was it, Jane, and what was it about?"

Jane turned back to him, her eyes big.

"Oh, an awful row, it was!" she answered. "A week ago last Friday. No, Saturday. No, Friday. It was Saturday they went. You never saw such faces! Talk about thunder! The cars was jest one long string! I called it the funeral procession. The master and missus stayed in their rooms till the last toot, and I was glad they did. I was the only one who stood for them."

"We are still waiting to hear the cause of the row," Jerry reminded her.

"Don't ask *me*! I wasn't there when the balloon went up, but I knew it would come some time, what with all the guests going about in perjamas, and Mrs. Arthur with gold toe-nails, it's a fact, and you should have seen some of the dances, I used to watch through a crack. Honestly, the way they moved, you'd think they'd got stomach-aches! And Wac—Mr. Arthur—acting as if it was his house already, and once, what do you think, imitating Sir Walter to all the guests after he'd gone to bed, bent back, stick, and all. Someone ought to have thrown a mop at him! But after they all went I heard Sir Walter say, 'Well, that's the end of *them*, from now on we're going to live our own lives, not theirs,' and do you know what he did next?"

She paused dramatically, and they asked, obligingly:

"What?"

"Got rid of the wireless and the telephone and the electric

cooker, you'll have to use the range, Mr. O'Hara—sold his cars, bought a horse, and had his carriage cleaned up. Of course, they all said it was second childhood."

"And—what do *you* think?" asked Lucy, watching the girl with growing interest.

Jane considered for a moment, then answered carefully:

"Well, see, I look at it like this. When you're very, very old, you can't help going a bit dotty, we'll all do it ourselves one day, won't we, but, well, p'r'aps old people aren't always the only dotty ones, and I'd sooner be like them than go about with gold toe-nails, that's a fact!"

"Gold toe-nails! Yer kiddin'!" said Tonsil. "Ain't yer?"

"I've seen 'em on first nights," Smith corroborated, recalling his theatrical experiences.

"*And* finger-nails like living blood!" nodded Jane. "But they nearly all had those. There may be something wrong with me, but red finger-nails make me sick, jest like you'd cut your hand with a knife." It was as well that Madeleine had modified her usual colour scheme that day. "And as for some of the faces, you never knew what they really were not unless you took them their early tea."

"You mentioned that Arthur is Sir Walter's grandson," said Jerry. "Isn't there anyone in between?"

"There was this time last year," answered Jane, "but he swallowed a fishbone, so now Mr. Arthur's next."

"Oh! Well, now we've heard all about that, can you tell us anything more about the locked room?"

"Yus, I was goin' ter ask that," added Tonsil, eagerly. "What's it kep' locked for?"

Jane shook her head. For an instant Tonsil forgot his question as he watched the pretty movement of the sandy curls.

"Nobody knows," she replied, "and I don't advise nobody to try and find out!"

"But I understand somebody's tried?" mentioned O'Hara.

Now the sandy curls nodded.

"Who?"

"Mrs. Arthur. My! Didn't Lady Cresswell blaze up!"

"Probably haunted," suggested O'Hara. "A house like this is bound to have a ghost."

"A lot o' good lockin' a ghost in!" retorted Tonsil. "More likely it's a corpse!"

"Now, then, don't start that!" said Madeleine, sharply.

Despite her modern tendencies Madeleine was warming to the old-world atmosphere of Cresswell Hall, and had decided that one of her first jobs was going to be to look for a lavender-bed. There she would be quite ready to meet happy spectres of the past—ladies in crinolines and men in wigs and plum-coloured stockings—but she did not want any ghosts inside the house, and corpses were strictly barred anywhere. Already she was wondering what her first night would be like here. She did not wish it ruined by Tonsillian horrors!

Happily, Jane derided Tonsil's idea.

"Corpse!" she scoffed. "Who'd talk to a corpse!"

But this only set up a new anxiety.

"Talk?" repeated Lucy.

"Well, mind you, Mrs. Clover, I'm not *sure*," said Jane, "but once when I was going by I did think I heard Lady Cresswell's voice in the room. Talking soft like."

"Well, Sir Walter could have been in with her," replied Jerry. "If she goes in, I suppose he does, too."

"Yes, that's right, you'd think he would," Jane agreed, "and that's what I thought till I come upon him two minutes later fast asleep in the library! I'd gone there to give the fire a poke, last spring it was, and he woke up and asked where Lady Cresswell was."

"Did ye tell him?" exclaimed O'Hara.

"Yes."

"And did he ask, 'How did ye know?'"

Jane, whose mind was simple, looked astonished.

"How did *you* know?" she demanded.

"Because, sure, that's what I'm thinkin' I might have asked meself," responded Jerry. "And what did ye say?"

"I—I told him I thought I'd heard her voice. Like I've jest told you. And thinking he must have been with her."

"Ah! And *then* what did he do?"

"He looked a bit funny," she recalled, "and he got up and hobbled off."

"Up to the room, I expect?"

"P'r'aps, but I didn't follow him."

"Have ye ever heard anyone talkin' in the room since?" pressed O'Hara.

"No."

"Have ye listened?"

Jane frowned, and answered a little breathlessly, "Do you think I go spying?"

"Ah, don't be angry, now," remonstrated O'Hara, "but we're all human!"

The frown faded. It was difficult to remain cross with Tim O'Hara.

"Well, I have listened once or twice," she admitted, "but there's never been a sound since, and so I expect it's jest a room where they keep their valuables."

"And when ye heard Lady Cresswell's voice, she was croonin' to the family heirlooms," smiled O'Hara. "Well, Jane, ye've certainly interested us as well as instructed us, and I raise me glass to ye!"

As he did so, a bell rang.

"Now, what bell's that?" he exclaimed.

"The back door," replied Jane.

"Ah! And which of us answers the back door?" he asked.

"Not the cook, anyway!"

"I'll answer it," said Jane, and jumped up from her chair.

But before she left the room another bell rang, and she stopped short. "Gracious! That's the front!"

"For a house that's set on a quiet life this isn't a bad start!" laughed Madeleine. "Carry on, Jane, I'll do the front one."

She ran upstairs, paused at the top, and walked sedately to the front door. Opening it, she received the shock of her life. Standing outside was Mr. Edward P. Bloggs.

CHAPTER IX

DISCUSSION BELOW STAIRS

FOR A moment she did not believe it. Nor, apparently, did Mr. Bloggs. They stared at each other in mutual amazement, while the world of each revolved. Then, his fat cheeks red, Mr. Bloggs stuttered:

"What—what—are *you* doing here?"

"What are you?" retorted Madeleine.

That was as far as they got. A voice came from the drawing-room as Lady Cresswell appeared in the doorway.

"This is hardly the hour for a visit," she remarked. "We are about to have lunch, but if you will come in we will see you. I know of course what you have come about, Mr. Stockton."

Mr. Bloggs's cheeks grew redder while Madeleine's eyes grew bigger at the name of Stockton. The next instant Mr. Bloggs dived past her, and when she turned he had vanished with Lady Cresswell into the drawing-room and the door was closing. She sped back to the basement. She entered the servants' parlour like a whirlwind.

"What's the matter?" exclaimed Jerry.

"Bloggs!" she gasped.

"I—beg your pardon?"

"Bloggs! He's here! In this house! I've just let him in! He's talking to Lady Cresswell!" She paused for breath, then added, "And he's calling himself Stockwell! I mean, Stockton."

"Jerusalem!" murmured Smith.

"Of course—it's just incredible!" said Madeleine. "My mind's spinning! Who was the other bell? Stockton calling himself Bloggs?"

"It was somebody wanting to see Mrs. Clover," answered Fingleton, and Madeleine noticed Lucy's absence for the first time. "Dear me! Bless my soul! What a—coincidence! Er—what do we do now?"

Before any of them could answer that perplexing question, Lucy returned, looking grim.

"You don't have to tell me—I know," she stated. "Our beloved Bloggs has called on Lady Cresswell and is having an interview with her at this moment." She looked at Madeleine curiously. "Did you let him in?"

Madeleine nodded.

"Was he surprised?"

"We both nearly fell flat! But how did *you* know?"

"Our back-door caller told me," responded Lucy. "That was what he called for. To give us the red light!" She turned to Jerry. "Do you remember when you visited me at my flat I mentioned that I'd put a sleuth on the track of Mr. Bloggs?"

"Yes, I remember," Jerry answered.

"And do you remember I had a telephone call just before I decided to come here with you? Well, that was from the sleuth. His name is George Gem, and he really seems a gem, because he got busy at once, and beginning his enquiries at Mr. Bloggs's hotel he phoned me to say that he'd found out where he had gone. He'd gone to Euston, where he'd booked a ticket for Cresswell!"

"What!" cried Jerry. "You knew that already, then?"

"It was what decided me to come," she said.

"But why——"

"Didn't I tell you? Yes—why didn't I?" She mused, putting the question to herself. "I'm not quite sure. I just followed an impulse not to. Perhaps I wanted it to be a surprise—perhaps I thought it might put us all in too much of a flutter. Anyway, don't let's worry about that. You know it now, and I promise you I've no further secrets. I

certainly *don't* know what's brought Mr. Bloggs here. Gem says he's been in the neighbourhood several days."

"Lady Cresswell knows why he is here," interposed Madeleine.

"Well, sure, wouldn't he be tellin' her?" said O'Hara.

"I mean, she knew when he arrived. I heard her say so."

"Oh, did she, now?" All at once he gave an exclamation. "Bedad, I wonder! Ye said just now, Mr. Fingleton, that this was a coincidence——"

"I never knew a more amazing one!" agreed Jerry.

"Ah, but I'm never a great believer in coincidences," went on O'Hara, "and maybe this isn't one at all, at all. Maybe 'tis all because Mr. Bloggs put a cross to an advertisement he was interested in one day, and leavin' the paper in the office where he'd read it—when was he last in the office, Madeleine?"

Madeleine thought for a moment, and then answered, "It was last Thursday—for half an hour."

"And it was in yesterday's paper on Friday—if ye get me—that I saw the advertisement that brought *me* here, and what was it drew my attention to it but a little cross? So wouldn't it be a cross, now, and not a coincidence, that has brought us all together at this spot!"

They considered the theory in silence for a few moments. Then Jerry said:

"I think you're right, Tim. Bloggs was interested in the advertisement before we were—and no wonder he nearly fell flat when he found us all on his heels! But I still can't fathom what brought *him* along! Surely he didn't apply for the job of butler!"

Lucy smiled. "We can leave that to my friend Gem. That's his headache."

"Where is Gem now?" asked Madeleine.

"Somewhere about. He's been dogging Bloggs for hours, and when he found he was actually coming here, he nipped

round by the back way to give us warning. When Bloggs leaves, Gem will follow him again, checking his movements outside while we are learning what we can inside. Then we are to compare notes, and 'act according.'"

"How did Gem know we were here?" enquired Jerry. "You didn't tell him over the phone."

"Oh, yes, I did," returned Lucy. "I rang him up again after you left."

Jane suddenly exploded, unable to stand it any longer.

"What is all this about?" she demanded. "Honestly, you're all getting me fair dizzy!"

O'Hara stretched out a long arm and patted her shoulder.

"One day, me dear, when we have months and months of time, we'll tell ye the story," he said, "but faith there's no time now, for shouldn't someone be takin' up the family lunch, we havin' finished our own?"

"It's a cold lunch today," Jane reminded him, "and all laid out." She glanced at the clock. "But s'pose that man's stopping them start it, they hate anything late, p'r'aps I'd better go up and see what's doing."

"Yes, do," grinned O'Hara, "and if it's turnin' him out they're after, just give us a call!"

Jane departed.

"Nice girl, that," commented Smith.

"Bit of all right," added Tonsil.

"At the moment, we'd be lost without her," said Lucy, "but let's stop talking, and listen."

They listened. Nothing rewarded their strained attention but silence. Suddenly Madeleine realised how completely silent it was. No sound of traffic. No distant city drone. In this isolated, sheltered little world it would be easy to let time slip backwards, provided there were no intrusions from outside. Mr. Bloggs was a considerable intrusion. She wondered whether they were themselves. . . .

"What are we supposed to be listening for?" enquired Jerry.

"The sound of Mr. Bloggs's body being flung out into the snow," answered O'Hara.

"That wouldn't make no sound," said Tonsil. "See, snow's soft."

"So it is," admitted O'Hara, sadly, "and there isn't any snow, and even if there were, and it were hard, would either Sir Walter or Lady Cresswell use personal violence to get rid of their guest? So we must be listening for something else."

"How did you get hold of the sleuth?" Madeleine asked Lucy.

"I saw his advertisement—he calls himself a private enquiry agent—and rang him up. When he came to see me, I commissioned him to find Mr. Bloggs."

"Well, now we have found him."

"Yes."

"And what do we do with him?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"I expect we have to sue him or something," said Jerry.

"Yes, but how do we do that?" pressed Madeleine. "Do we just find a policeman, and point to Mr. Bloggs, and say, 'I sue that man,' and then is he taken to a police station and tried?"

The idea shocked Fingleton.

"Dear me, no!" he exclaimed. "I imagine that, in the case of an alleged offence of this kind, which would come under the heading of a criminal offence and not a tort—I believe I am correct in saying that—there would have to be an indictment containing a statement of the specific offence with which Mr. Bloggs—alias Stockton—would be charged. And, of course, the statement would have to include sufficient information to—er—justify the further proceedings."

When they had all recovered from this, O'Hara remarked:

"And while all that was happening, Mr. Bloggs, alias Stockton, would quietly vanish again. Wouldn't it be much quicker, now, to go up and give him a crack on the head?"

The practical suggestion came too late, for a few moments later they heard a dull thud conjuring not a crack on the head, but a vision of a front door closing ungently. Then followed the hurried footsteps of Jane returning.

"I've just seen him out," she panted, "and will one of you please to go up at once?"





CHAPTER X

MAINLY CONCERNING MR. BLOGGS

"WHICH one of us?" asked Madeleine.

"They didn't say which," answered Jane, "they jest said 'one of them.'"

"Well, it ain't goin' ter be me," murmured Tonsil.

"No one contemplated it would be you," O'Hara assured him, and glanced towards Jerry.

But Jerry shook his head.

"No, you brought us here," he said. "I think you'd better go."

"Ah, I'm only the cook," retorted O'Hara. "'Tis the steward's job, I'm thinkin'—or would it be the housekeeper's?"

Lucy rose with a smile.

"Yes, I rather feel this is my job," she replied, "and while I'm away you can all enjoy yourselves with the washing up."

With a sensation that she was back on the stage about to answer a cue, Lucy ascended the basement stairs, paused at the top to see that her dress was tidy, crossed the wide hall to the drawing-room door, and knocked.

"Come in," called Lady Cresswell's voice.

She entered. As on the previous occasion, Sir Walter and his lady were occupying their thronelike chairs, and she had a sudden rather satisfying vision of Mr. Edward P. Bloggs sitting on one of the other seven seats, still arranged in their formal semi-circle, and feeling very much alone.

"You wanted to see me, my lady?" she asked, in the most housekeeping voice she could summon.

"To be quite frank, Mrs. Clover," replied Lady Cresswell, "we were not perfectly sure which of you we wanted to see, but you will do."

"Yes, you or Mr. Haines, the steward," added Sir Walter, as one defending his sex.

"Shall I fetch Mr. Haines, sir?" enquired Lucy, and then followed an impulse to add, "Believing you might have something important to say, we were not sure ourselves who should come."

Sir Walter looked at her sharply.

"What made you think it would be important, may I ask?" he demanded.

"Well—two things, Sir Walter," answered Lucy, deciding that she must affect a clear mind whether she actually possessed it or not. "One was your recent visitor."

"Oh, indeed?"

"And the other, Mrs. Clover?" said Lady Cresswell.

"You have told me you like punctuality, my lady," replied Lucy, "and it is already past your luncheon hour. Your lunch is waiting for you in the dining-room. We have had ours."

Sir Walter's eyebrows shot up. Since they were the only hair he had on the whole of his head, the effect could not be missed. Lucy wondered whether she were overdoing the efficiency stunt. But the eyebrows came down again without catastrophe, and after a hesitating moment, Lady Cresswell even smiled.

"I am glad you are so observant, Mrs. Clover," she said. "It is a most useful and—in your position—necessary quality. No, I do not think we require Mr. Haines here——" She paused and sent an enquiring glance at Sir Walter, whom she never allowed to remain out of a conversation for long, however sleepy he might become. Sir Walter nodded agreement. "Not yet, anyway. You will do." She paused again, uncertain for a moment of her next words. Her smile had gone. "Now, Mrs. Clover, you mentioned our visitor, and of course you are right in thinking that this is in connection with his call. I—I understand that you already know Mr. Stockton?"

"Not under that name, my lady," replied Lucy.

Once more Sir Walter's eyebrows went up. For octogenarian eyebrows they were remarkably active.

"What's that? Not in that name, did she say?" he exclaimed.

"We know him under the name of Mr. Edward P. Bloggs," said Lucy.

"Bless my soul! Most interesting!" muttered the baronet. "Most interesting! But he seems to know you under your right names. He undoubtedly mentioned some of them!"

"Perhaps that is because we don't feel his necessity of having more than one," answered Lucy, and thought to herself, "I think I'm doing rather well!" She went on, calmly, "Has he been saying things about us?"

"He has, Mrs. Clover," responded Sir Walter, grimly. "He has! You will be interested to hear them!"

"I should have been more interested to hear them in his presence, Sir Walter." And again she thought to herself, "I'm being wonderful! When am I going to say the wrong thing and come down with a bump!"

Sir Walter and Lady Cresswell exchanged glances.

"Yes, we agree with you," nodded Lady Cresswell. "It would have been far more satisfactory. But Mr.—Whatever-his-name-is—left us rather hurriedly. The reason he gave was—how did he put it, my dear?"

"He said—let me think—yes, these were his words," recalled Sir Walter. "'No, sir, I would rather not meet them here in your house. Oh, believe me, I shall meet them, but if it were here I am afraid I might say things I would prefer not to say beneath your roof.'"

"And then he marched out, Mrs. Clover, and I sent Jane down for you," continued Lady Cresswell. "And now you would like to hear what he did say about you—before I hear what you have to say about *him*."

"If you please, my lady."

"One moment, my dear," interposed Sir Walter. "I have repeated his final words, but—in spite of his insistence on his good manners in another man's house—there were some of his previous words we had better not repeat."

"Perhaps you would like to give Mrs. Clover the gist yourself?"

"Eh? Yes, certainly, certainly."

"And you might begin by letting her know——?"

"Of course, of course. *Ah!* One moment!" His expression changed, and he bent forward and seized his right toe. He tugged it back. His expression relaxed. He resumed his more dignified position. "Just a twinge. They soon go. What are we talking about? Yes, yes—Mr. Stockton." He glared at his toe, defying it to repeat its offence. Then he went on, "Did Mr. O'Hara mention to you, Mrs. Clover, that just before he called upon us last—when was it?—Friday—we were on the point of engaging another staff?"

"He did mention it, sir," answered Lucy.

"Ah, he did? Well, that staff was to have been provided by Mr. Stockton—and I am bound to say that, when he came here in answer to our advertisement, we were quite impressed with him, yes, quite impressed. Perhaps I was a little more impressed than Lady Cresswell——"

"Oh, I was impressed, too," interposed his wife. "At the time, you know. At the time."

"Mr.—Stockton certainly has a way of talking to one," murmured Lucy.

"He has," snapped Sir Walter. "He knew exactly what we wanted. He agreed with all our ideas. 'And you must have only those around you, Sir Walter,' he said, 'who *do* agree, and believe me, they're hard to find!' Ah, but he could find 'em! Oh, yes! He had a very wide clientele, and he happened to have the exact staff we needed—a staff that would co-operate. How he liked that word, my dear, didn't he? Co-operate. He believed in co-operation. Yes,

it was only afterwards that we began to feel doubtful about the miracle. Now, what was it made us doubtful, Cynthia?"

"He was too—confident, perhaps," suggested Lady Cresswell. "And he had flat feet." After a moment, while they considered these theories, she added, "And perhaps it seemed rather too *much* of a miracle."

"But when Mr. O'Hara called," retorted Sir Walter, "he—ah!" He glared at his toe apprehensively. "All right. False alarm. When Mr. O'Hara called he presented us with an even greater miracle! Mr. Stockton had hummed and hawed about the date. You remember? It would take a few days to notify and collect the staff. We had to admit that was reasonable, and so we did not expect that we should be able to get rid of the old staff quite so soon as we had hoped." He turned back to Lucy. "Why are you standing? Please sit down. But when Mr. O'Hara called, he not only had the complete new staff at his finger-tips, but he could bring it along in a couple of days—today, in fact! It was ridiculous! A super-miracle! So why did we trust Mr. O'Hara when we had ceased to trust Mr. Stockton?"

"I think we rather liked the originality of his letter," replied Lady Cresswell.

"We are not out for originality," said the baronet.

"No, but when we consented to see Mr. O'Hara, we found that he could be quite as persuasive as Mr. Stockton, and it certainly was an advantage that we could keep to the date we had planned and would not have to ask any of the staff to stay on any longer. They were getting rather restless—and so were we. You see, Mrs. Clover," he explained, "we gave them notice a week ago—with a full month's wages, of course, but they were quite happy to agree with our suggestion that they should leave in a week. It was only when we found that we could not secure the kind of service we required locally that we advertised. And it was only because of the somewhat strained atmosphere here—though

I need not go into that—that we engaged you all without troubling about references.”

“I quite understand, my lady,” answered Lucy.

“Will you now tell her what Mr. Stockton said?” Lady Cresswell asked her husband.

“That is what I am supposed to be doing,” he grunted. “Mr. Stockton himself brought up the question of references. He was shocked when he heard we were engaging you all without them. He, of course, would have supplied references, which—you remember how he emphasised this, Cynthia?—which were particularly important when dealing with applicants answering such an advertisement as ours. I asked him to explain what he meant. He quoted one of the phrases. Can you guess which one it was, Mrs. Clover?”

“I would rather be told,” replied Lucy.

“This was the phrase.” He looked at her hard. “‘Considerable ultimate advantage may accrue to the applicants.’ Now—did that influence *you* at all?”

He looked at her harder still, and Lady Cresswell frowned, though Lucy was not sure whether the frown was meant for her or Sir Walter.

“Speaking for myself, and of course I can only speak for myself,” responded Lucy, carefully, “it did not influence me in the least.”

“I believe you,” nodded Lady Cresswell.

“H’m. But some of the others may have been influenced, eh?” pressed Sir Walter.

Now Lady Cresswell interposed definitely with, “I don’t think that is for her to say, dear,” and Lucy felt sure now that the frown had not been for Lady Cresswell’s house-keeper but for her husband. “After all—we should hardly have inserted the phrase—would we?—if we had desired it to be ignored.”

To Lucy’s relief, Sir Walter smiled. She had rather expected him to go up in the air.

"My wife is two years my junior," he remarked, "and is consequently two years farther removed from her dotage. I should not have put that question. I apologise."

"Oh, please don't!" exclaimed Lucy. "Of course I understand. But I think I can safely say this. None of us are more likely to have been influenced by the phrase than—well—Mr. Bloggs. I mean, Mr. Stockton."

"H'm. Then let's get back to Mr. Stockton. I understand he was let in by the parlourmaid?"

"Yes, Miss Trent opened the door to him."

"Madeleine," murmured Lady Cresswell, correctively.

"He had called," continued Sir Walter, "to ask why I had cancelled my business with him, though of course I was perfectly justified in doing so—nothing had been signed, and the arrangement was merely provisional. But the situation was now—aggravated?—by the fact that he was admitted—so he said—by his own secretary. Now, let us be clear as we go along. Is Miss Trent—that is—er—Madeleine—Mr. Stockton's secretary?"

"She is certainly not Mr. Stockton's secretary," answered Lucy. "She *was* Mr. Bloggs's secretary."

Sir Walter looked exasperated.

"Come, come, do not let us get more confused than we need!" he snapped. "Mr. Stockton and Mr. Bloggs are evidently the same individual, so let us stick to one name or the other, I don't care which!"

"We had better keep to Stockton," said Lady Cresswell, "as that is the only name *we* know him by."

"I agree. Stockton. According to him, Miss—damn!—I beg your pardon—Madeleine—according to Mr. Stockton, Madeleine should be in London at this moment, attending to his business there. You should all be there——"

"No, Sir Walter, not me," interrupted Lucy.

"Oh! Not you?"

"I was never in his employment."

"H'm. Well, I am merely repeating what he said, and he said you all were—he made no distinctions—and that although you were all under notice to go through incompetence, you had—how did he put it?—you had anticipated the date. Yes, that was his expression. Anticipated the date. Then he enlarged on your incompetence. He told us things for our private ears which we were not supposed to repeat——"

"And which we need not repeat," interposed Lady Cresswell.

"I have no intention of repeating them, my dear—not here or now, at any rate—but I may mention, Mrs. Clover, that these things went much farther than incompetence. You were evidently ruining one of his London businesses, and he warned me that unless I dismissed you immediately I would very soon find out for myself that all he had stated was true.

"One moment, let me finish," he went on, as Lucy battled with rising indignation. "I am aware from Mr. O'Hara's letter that there is another version, but before going into that—as of course I intended to—I wished to clear up what seemed to me a most remarkable coincidence. Whether you left your employer, or whether your employer left you, the fact—the astonishing fact—remained that you had both come here to Cresswell Hall! I asked him to explain this, and at first he was unable to. There was no doubt about his astonishment at finding you here—was there, my dear?"

"None at all," answered Lady Cresswell, acidly. "That, at any rate, was genuine!"

"But all at once he cracked his knuckles—like that!" He tried to crack his knuckles, and failed. His knuckles were not as obedient as they had been in his youth. "'Of course!' he said. 'This is another evidence of their spying! They must have gone through my private papers and decided to steal a march on me! There, Sir Walter, you have it!' he said. 'There is your proof of their duplicity!' His word again. Duplicity. 'We will send for them,' I answered. But—

he did not want that." Sir Walter paused, and wrinkled his nose. "As I have already told you, he did not wish to create an ugly scene under my roof. He left hastily, before—now for another of his expressions—let me get it right, for I thought it rather a good one—let me think—ah, yes—'I leave you, sir, before the temptation becomes too great to remain.' H'm. And then, mumbling something about this not being the last of it and solicitors, he did leave us. And so now, Mrs Clover, it is your turn."

Lucy took a deep breath. She wondered how she could make a long story into a short one, and whether, whatever its length, she could tell it in the quiet befitting manner of a housekeeper. She admitted afterwards that her impulse while listening to Mr. Edward P. Bloggs's latest villainy was to rush out and find him and biff him on the nose. Lucy, despite a colourful past, had never biffed anybody on the nose, and she had always thought that, given a good sound excuse, it must be rather fun. Now she certainly had her excuse.

"Do you want to hear now," she asked, "or would you rather have your lunch first?"

"We would like to hear now," answered Lady Cresswell definitely. "In the circumstances our lunch can wait a little longer."

"Very well, my lady. I'll try and make it short." And then she discovered that, after all, it was quite easy to make it short. "Most of what you have heard is quite true, if you reverse it. The London business for which Mr. Bloggs—I'm sorry, but that is how *we* know him—engaged this staff was a bogus business. He never paid any salaries—they were always coming next week—and what was worse he got several of the staff to invest money in the business. Eventually he walked out, leaving us cold."

"Dear me!" murmured Lady Cresswell. "That sounds quite shocking!"

"It was more than shocking, my lady."

"But you mentioned just now that you were not a member of the staff," Sir Walter reminded her, "so where do you come in?"

Lucy felt herself colouring slightly.

"I came in as an investor in the business," she replied, "to the tune of two thousand pounds."

"Good God!" exclaimed Sir Walter, and stared at her incredulously. "Or didn't I hear you right?"

"Are you really telling us, Mrs. Clover," demanded Lady Cresswell, "that you were—that you allowed this man to persuade you to put two thousand pounds into a bogus business? Two thousand pounds?"

"I'm afraid so, my lady."

"Without anybody's advice?"

Lucy wondered whether she were right in detecting more severity than sympathy in Lady Cresswell's tone. She began to wonder, also, whether her story were being believed. It did sound rather thin.

"I hope I shall manage your affairs better than I have managed my own," she answered, rather stiffly, "but of course, if you have any doubts, you must let me know."

There was a short silence. Then Sir Walter snapped:

"Have you had any advice since?"

"I have placed the matter in other hands," said Lucy, "but I hadn't any intention—we none of us had—of worrying you with all this. It is our own personal affair, and we shall try to keep it so. But if you find it all too disturbing——"

"Wait a moment, wait a moment," interrupted Sir Walter. "There is something else we haven't cleared up yet. You have heard Mr. Stockton's—Bloggs—confound it!—you have heard his explanation of your all coming up here."

"You mean what he said about his private papers?"

"Exactly!"

"Did you believe that?"

"I am only asking for information, Miss Clover."

"Mrs."

"I beg your pardon."

"No, I beg yours. I'm afraid I'm forgetting I am a housekeeper. It shall not happen again. We were all as astounded to find him here as he was to find us here. The only way we can account for it is this. Mr. O'Hara was reading a paper in the office, and his attention was drawn to your advertisement because there was a cross against it. We think Mr. Bloggs must have made that cross. And now perhaps the most satisfactory thing will be for us all to give notice."

"Don't be ridiculous!" retorted Lady Cresswell. "I think that is all for the moment. I won't need you again till after tea, when we will have a talk about the housekeeping money."

Rather unsteadily, Lucy rose from her chair and left the room.

"The poor darlings!" murmured Lady Cresswell. "Well, my dear, shall we go to lunch?"

"Ah!" shouted Sir Walter, and plunged down to his toe.

CHAPTER XI

COMPLETELY CONCERNING MR. BLOGGS

WHEN MR. EDWARD P. BLOGGS, alias Stockton, and various other names with which this story is not concerned, walked out of Cresswell Hall, he did so in a very bewildered state of mind.

His instinct, when the door had been opened to him by his late secretary, had been to turn and fly. Not because he was a coward, or unused to tackling delicate situations, but because the present situation was so astounding, so incredible, so impossible, that it smacked of the uncanny. There had, however, been no opportunity to fly. Lady Cresswell's voice from the drawing-room had intruded on his impulse, and he had to admit afterwards that this was probably just as well. Feeling his way cautiously, he had acquired a knowledge which otherwise would have been denied him of the general position, and as his nerve returned he made what use he could of this knowledge. Anticipating the story that would be told of him, he attempted to counter it in advance by giving a more favourable version and he felt that he had conducted the difficult interview with some credit. But he was not going to face the members of his late staff—not there, anyhow—and he needed to get away by himself to think. For what he had not learned, and what remained a source of bewilderment as he strode along the drive towards the lodge gate, was how in the name of mystery these confounded people had followed on his heels! Impossible that it should be a mere coincidence!

He had suggested an explanation to Sir Walter and Lady Cresswell. It was, he considered, a very clever suggestion—in fact, just the kind of brainwave that would occur to a

fellow as smart as Edward P. Bloggs. But he knew it was not the right explanation. He was a sufficient master of psychology to realise that Madeleine's astonishment had been as genuine as his own. The fact that he had left the marked advertisement in the office of Spare Parts Limited did not occur to him.

Coupled with his bewilderment was a sense of personal injury. Yes, he was indignant as well as dumbfounded by the turn of events. When it had become necessary to flit from London and to shed his fictitious name and firm, this remote spot in Derbyshire where dwelt two ancient simpletons had made an instant appeal, and ignorant of the fact that he had unconsciously made a pencil mark against the advertisement that had brought him here—the wording of the advertisement held pleasant possibilities—all he knew was that he had lost or mislaid the paper, and had had to buy another copy. And when he had travelled to Derbyshire and had his first interview with the said ancient simpletons, he imagined that all was going smoothly.

He had spoken truly when he had referred to his large clientele. What he had not referred to was the clientele's shady nature. Given a little time, he could easily assemble a staff of human rooks, and with himself as chief rook—for he had decided that he would be Sir Walter's new steward—there was every prospect of good plunder. He had even worked out a rough scheme by which the chief rook could, at a judicious moment, fly away all by himself, leaving the other lesser rooks to be shot. . . .

And now—*this* !

In vain he tried to think of a way of repairing the damage. He reached the lodge gates in a miserable frame of mind. Apprehension returned, and he jerked his head round suddenly, with an unpleasant sensation that he was being followed. But he did not see anybody—only a vaguely moving shadow which he ascribed wrongly to his

imagination—and swearing at himself, he passed out into the road.

His eyes were on the ground as the gate swung to behind him. He blundered into a soft form, and clung to it to save them both from going over. He found himself staring into startled, attractive eyes.

“I—I beg your pardon,” he stammered.

“Pity you can’t look where you’re going,” replied the owner of the eyes.

He released her a few moments after it was necessary. The smell of scent had come pleasantly to his nostrils; he was in a mood for comfort.

“I said I was sorry,” he mentioned.

“Yes, and you haven’t got half a grip!” retorted the fair one. “I’m going to find some nice bruises when I go to bed tonight!” She looked at him searchingly, as though trying to size him up. “Are you the new butler?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“So you said before.”

“Yes, but I didn’t mean it the same way this time.”

“Oh, didn’t you? Then p’r’aps I’m the one to apologise. Cut above a butler, what? What about steward?”

Her tone was cheeky, but he did not resent it. He was becoming every bit as interested as she was.

“You seem to know plenty about the staff at Cresswell Hall,” he remarked.

“You’re telling me!” answered the girl. “Until this morning I was their bloody parlourmaid!”

“Indeed? Really?” His interest became intensified. This was the first time he had seen the original parlourmaid; on his first call he had been admitted by Jane. He was quick to judge types, and the pictorial adjective neither surprised nor shocked him. But he enquired, with a smile, “And were you dismissed for your language?”

She screwed up her eyes and regarded him speculatively.

She, also, was a judge of types, and though she had no subtle perception there was one type which she—to use her own expression—could smell a mile off.

"I thought I was asking the questions," she sniffed. "Don't worry if you want to walk on, but before I get friendly I like to know who I'm talking to."

"In fact, you're a damn smart bit of all right, eh?" grinned Mr. Bloggs. "Well, I'm not a butler, and I'm not a steward, but I'm certainly as interested in the new staff as you seem to be yourself."

"Oh, so I'm interested, am I? Well, I'd be interested to see them all come a cropper! If they all died tomorrow I should worry—so I hope they're not friends of yours!"

"No, I wouldn't call them friends of mine," he said. "On the contrary."

"Oh! Like that, is it?" she challenged. "You wouldn't worry, either?"

"Not in the least."

In the little silence that followed each decided that it might be useful to know a little more about the other. Mr. Bloggs glanced back through the gate. There was no sign of the vaguely moving shadow. He looked at the girl again. Nice sleeky hair. Nice impertinent eyes. Nice figure. Yes, very nice figure. The way he liked 'em. But Mr. Bloggs was not only interested in her figure.

"Look here!" he exclaimed, suddenly.

"What?" asked the girl.

"Did you really mean what you said just now?"

"Said what just now?"

"About wanting them to come a cropper—and not being heart-broken if they all popped off?"

She screwed up her eyes again. Something funny about all this!

"I didn't put it quite like that," she remarked, cautiously.

"No, but you didn't put it any less strongly, my girl!"

If you want your words, you said that if they died tomorrow you wouldn't worry—which," he added, gaily, "isn't the kind of thing one would want repeated if they *did*!"

"Did what?"

"Die!"

"Oh! And are you offering to kill them? Come to that, you said they weren't any friends of yours. What is all this about?" As he did not answer at once, she added, with her first trace of uneasiness, "Suppose we stop this silly talk about dying—of course no one wants that!"

"Of course not," Mr. Bloggs reassured her, patting her shoulder to see how she took it. She took it remarkably well. "We just—neither of us—have any cause to love 'em—eh?"

The hand that had patted her was still on her shoulder. She squinted down on it. It had a diamond ring on it. She wondered if it was real. Sometimes you couldn't tell whether they were worth the mint or had come out of a Christmas cracker!

"What have *you* been calling there for?" she asked.

"What were *you* going to call there for?" he countered.

"What! Me call?"

"Weren't you going in as I came out?"

"That I wasn't!"

"No?"

"Of course, you're not curious, are you?"

"Yes, very curious."

"P'r'aps I am, too! I say, when you put your hand on a girl's shoulder, does it always stay there for keeps?"

He laughed, and took it away.

"I believe in combining pleasure with business," he answered, "but—just at the moment—it's business I'm more interested in."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," said the girl.

"If you'd like to find out," replied Mr. Bloggs, "I'm staying at an inn a bit away from here—the Red Stag—and I'll be

ready there with a drink if you care to look me up in—say—an hour?”

Whereupon Mr. Edward P. Bloggs winked at her, took off his hat, and turned away along the lane.

At this precise moment he did not quite know what he meant, either, but as he walked along, feeling that it had been wise not to ask the girl to walk along with him—“But then I am wise,” Mr. Bloggs told himself, with his usual avoidance of modesty—what he meant became plainer, and various possibilities formed in his self-seeking mind. He was not in the least sure that any of these possibilities could or would materialise. Nothing was certain in this very peculiar world. But, as he viewed the matter, there was much to gain, and nothing to lose, beyond what, it seemed, had already been lost; and even if there proved to be no method by which he could save something out of the wreck, any contribution he could make towards the discomfort of those who had caused the wreck would be eminently satisfactory.

“But of course,” he reflected, as he turned off the main road into the lane that led to the Red Stag, “she may not turn up.”

She did turn up. In an hour to the very minute she was turning up the lane herself, wondering whom she would have to enquire for. The fact that she did not know Mr. Bloggs’s name had not occurred to her till now, and she decided to describe him, if description were necessary, as a rather large gentleman in a check suit. When Mr. Bloggs had first called upon Sir Walter and Lady Cresswell he had worn a dark suit, but on his second call he had donned check to imply his change of mood.

The girl need not have worried. Mr. Bloggs was on the doorstep to receive her, and he led her immediately to the private room at the back which he had engaged.

“Good girl! Sit down,” he exclaimed. “I was wondering if you were really going to pop along.”

"If you want the truth, so was I," answered the girl, warily. "At first I wasn't going to." (This was a fib.) "You never know what people are up to these days, and that's a fact! But then I decided I'd chance it."

"Well, here's a prize for your decision," replied Mr. Bloggs. "It's after closing time, but you don't worry about that if you've got a hip pocket!"

He produced a flask and brought forward a couple of glasses. When the glasses had been filled, he raised his and winked.

"Here's to what's coming," he said.

"So long as it's good," returned the girl.

"Well, if it's as good as this, it'll be good. Want another?"

"Give me a moment!"

"O.K. I've a feeling you and I are going to get on. Now, then. What's your name? There's a lot I want to know, and you can ask your questions afterwards. They're easier to answer in a room than in a road. What's your name?"

"Bella Brown."

"Can I leave out the Brown?"

"The trouble with you is, you're too *slow*!"

"Life's short, Bella. That's why I don't believe in wasting time."

"I bet you've never wasted any! What's *your* name?"

For an instant Mr. Bloggs hesitated. Which should he choose?

"My name is Stockton," he said, deciding that this was the name she might be most likely to hear.

"That all?" enquired Bella, cheekily.

"I'll let you know another if you're good," he replied, "provided you're not too good. But don't let's rush things, Bella. Life's plenty long enough, if you're careful. Business first, pleasure afterwards."

"Yes, but what *is* the business?" demanded Bella, a little impatiently.

Her motto was to have the pleasure first, to make sure of it.

“What’s all this shermozzle about, that’s what I want you to tell me!” said Mr. Bloggs, bluntly. “Give me the whole low-down—why you were dismissed, why these new people have been engaged, why you were hanging about that gate—in fact, the lot.”

Bella pouted.

“I wasn’t hanging about the gate,” she denied.

“Oh, all right, all right!” exclaimed Mr. Bloggs, now feeling a little impatient himself. “We’ll cut that out!”

“And you can cut out why they’ve engaged the new lot, because I don’t know—any more than I know why they took on the rotten job! They’ll get fed to the teeth before the first week’s out, take *my* word.”

“Like you did?”

“I’ll say! Talk about dull! But it was all right when Mr. Arthur was there, before the bust-up.”

“Oh! There was a bust-up?”

“Weren’t you in England? Didn’t you hear it?”

“With Mr. Arthur?”

“Yes, with him and Goldie.”

“And who are Mr. Arthur and Goldie?”

“Oh, you don’t know? They’re next on the list, when the old ’uns die.”

“I see. Mr. Arthur is Sir Walter’s son?”

“No, grandson. The one in the middle died last year. Mr. Arthur’s wife’s called Goldie as she’s gold hair and gold toe-nails—fact!—but she won’t get any of grandad’s gold, not after that row.”

“Tell me about the row.”

“What’s the use?”

“It may be a lot of use. Was Mr. Arthur naughty?”

About to reply, Bella paused, and glanced at him swiftly.

“What made you ask that?” she enquired.

"Any reason why not?"

"N-no. No, of course not. Why should there be?" She was not subtle enough to conceal the anxiety in her tone. "The row was just about drinking and late nights, I expect. The two old dodderers can't stick a lot of noise. And they didn't like Arthur's—Mr. Arthur's friends, either. Not to mention Goldie. Mind you, Goldie's that snobbish, and sometimes you feel you could scratch her eyes out, but at least she's got spirit. And if *I'd* been barked at, like she was, when she tried to go in a room she wasn't supposed to, *I'd* have had a second shot at it myself!"

"What room was that?"

"Oh, just one nobody's supposed to go into."

"Why not?"

"Ask me another! I expect it's where they keep the crown jewels!"

"H'm," mused Mr. Bloggs. "H'm—yes—very likely, something of the sort. Pretty rich, the old baronet, eh?"

"Aren't they all?" queried Bella.

"Not nowadays."

"Well, I'll bet this one's got a packet! Matter of fact I happen to know he has. Not I mean that it's surprising, not with that big place of theirs, only I happen to *know*!"

"How do you know, Bella?"

"You don't think you're going to get any of it, do you?"

"There's no telling, my dear. And if I do, perhaps you will too?" Her eyes narrowed. "How do you happen to know? Have *you* been in that room?"

"No, *thank* you!"

"Well?"

"I'll say you're the world's prize sticker!" Suddenly she leaned across the little table that separated them. "All right! Listen!"

"Let me fill up your glass," smiled Mr. Bloggs.

She offered no objection.

"Now, don't expect more than you're going to get," she said, after a gulp. "See, I'd hate to disappoint you! But after the big row I happened to hear another one between Arthur and Goldie. What's that smile for?"

"Am I smiling?"

"Yes, and don't I know why! You think I listened. People like you pull girls to shreds!"

"I don't mind whether you listened or not," Mr. Bloggs assured her. "All I want to know is what you heard."

"Well, when things get hot, there's some things you hear without having to listen for 'em! Arthur went for Goldie proper—yes, and then her for him back! 'Now you've done it!' he said. 'Don't be a hat!' she said. 'We've been given the boot,' he said. 'They was going to give us the boot before this happened,' she said, 'and whose fault was *that*?' she said. 'Oh, stow it,' he said, 'you know what this may mean to us?' 'What?' she said. 'The loss of a hundred thousand,' he said, 'and if he cuts us out where'll you be?' 'Where *will* I be?' she said. 'You'll be Lady Cresswell one day without a cent, and that's no catch,' he said. She didn't like that. Talk about a cat spitting! 'Then I'll have to catch something better,' she said, 'so see you're bloody nice to them and wipe the bloody slate clean!'" Bella giggled "What language! Fancy, a lady! And I'm not giving you the lot—there was some even I didn't understand what it meant!"

"I should have thought you knew all the dictionary," remarked Mr. Bloggs.

"Well, I'll play you any day!"

"I wouldn't put it past you. What did Arthur do then?"

"Nothing that was any good, because out they all went next day, him and his friends, and after that it was like living in a tomb! I told Mr. Hawke he wouldn't stand it, and I was right!"

"Mr. Hawke?"

"The lodge-keeper."

"Lodge-keeper," repeated Mr. Bloggs. "I don't recall there was to be a new lodge-keeper."

"No, he was going to stay, but he walked out when the rest of them did. And so will Syd and Harry you'll find. Wait a minute, don't ask it! Syd and Harry are the two under-gardeners who live at the lodge with the keeper. . . . Oh, what's the use?" she exclaimed. She pushed her glass away petulantly. "It never rains but it pours! I'm out of a job, and only this morning I heard that my brother's the same—what's the matter? I never saw such a face for expressions!"

"Or I a girl for picking on them!" grinned Mr. Bloggs. "So your brother's out of a job, too, eh?"

"He is."

"Well, well, what bad luck! Is he—anything like you?"

"What's *that* mean?"

"A shrewd girl like you shouldn't have to guess."

"P'r'aps! But why waste time guessing when there's somebody by to tell you?"

"What was his job?"

"Horses."

"How did he lose it?"

"Never *you* mind!"

"I see. *I'm* to guess this time, eh? Well, p'r'aps I'm shrewd, too. Is he far from here?"

"Chesterfield."

"Chesterfield?"

"Am I in a witness-box?"

"That's not the hell of a way. Could you get him, if he's wanted, on the telephone?"

"I dare say. But look here, Mr. Stockton," she exclaimed, "I'm not sure how much I like all this. Couldn't you do a bit of real plain speaking for a change?"

"I'll do some plain speaking in a minute," promised Mr. Bloggs, "but I don't go places till I know where I'm going. Has your brother ever been here?"

"Why should he?"

"Meaning he hasn't?"

"No. Yes. Meaning he hasn't."

"What's your opinion of your late master and mistress?"

"Christ! You're all over the place!"

"Well, you just follow, like a good girl."

"But you *know* my opinion!"

"I'd like to hear it again."

"All right. It only needs one word—loony!"

Mr. Bloggs's cheeks expanded till she thought they were going to burst. Then he jumped up and walked to the window. He stayed there for over a minute, while she watched his back with an uneasy fascination. When he turned he had ceased to smile, and his little eyes were sharp and beady.

"More questions coming?" she muttered.

"Yeah!" he answered. "I want to know whether you can tell me where Arthur and Goldie hang out?"

She nodded.

"How do you know? Did he give you his address?" he demanded.

"You don't think I could learn anything straight, do you?" she retorted, with a return of spirit. Mr. Bloggs had a nasty habit of draining it out of you, and often when you least expected it. If he made love to you, she decided, he'd begin quiet and end violent. "I got his address when I posted some letters that had to be re-directed after he'd gone. Does that satisfy you?"

"And you remembered the address?"

"Why not?"

"Let's have it."

"3, Cloud Court, S.W.1. You didn't have to write that down to remember it!"

"No! Nor do I! Who else is in the family? Any other members hanging about, do you know?" he asked.

"From the talk I've heard, I believe that's the lot," Bella answered.

"Then does it come down to this?" said Mr. Bloggs. "Sir Walter and Lady Cresswell have no children living, and their only grandchild is this Arthur Cresswell, who lives at 3, Cloud Court, S.W.1., and who's married to a bit of fluff with gold toenails?"

"Well, that's one way of putting it," replied Bella.

"And now, Bella, for my last question."

"Don't you believe it!"

"Did you see that advertisement they put in the paper? Wanting a new staff?"

"Didn't we all!"

"Remember the wording?"

"I remember it was loony, like themselves!"

"Remember the phrase, 'considerable ultimate advantage may accrue to the applicants?'"

"That's right—that's how it went."

"And what did you all make of *that*?"

"We didn't make anything of it—cook suggested a month's holiday with pay."

Mr. Bloggs laughed.

"Well, I make more of it than that, my girl!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, and I'm out to scotch that 'ultimate advantage'—or divert it into more worthy channels, eh?" He laughed again.

"You and I are going to co-operate, Bella, and we're going to get some of that ultimate advantage for ourselves! Never mind details. Leave them to me. You just give me your brother's telephone number."

"And then what?" blinked Bella. "I'm getting dizzy!"

"I think, a little trip to London."

"What! London?"

"3, Cloud Court, S.W.1." He bent forward and pinched her cheek. "Maybe I'll take you with me!"

She stared at him, then frowned.

"Maybe you *won't*!" she retorted. "You know, you've never told me *yet* who you are! Only your name!"

"Think of me as your fairy godfather!" chuckled Mr. Bloggs, and walked again to the window. But he drew away almost immediately.

"Who the devil's that out there?" he muttered. "He was there last time, too!"

Bella moved towards the window, but he pulled her back.

"Don't show yourself!" he ordered. "He's gone now, anyway. Who the devil——?"





CHAPTER XII

CALM BETWEEN STORMS

GRESSWELL HALL had returned to a temporary serenity. The breeze that had ruffled its placid waters had calmed down, and there was now no outward indication of the further storms to come.

Lunch over, the new staff had devoted their energies to the intriguing business of digging themselves in. Among the first jobs was a visit to the storeroom where, in drawers and wardrobes, were enough appropriate clothes for a dozen staffs. "Lady Cresswell didn't expect you'd all have uniforms," said Jane, "and you was to take anything you needed from here." There were print dresses for the morning, dark ones for the afternoon, caps, cuffs and aprons, stockings and shoes. There were also suits for butlers and green aprons for gardeners. Suddenly Lucy Clover, eyeing a smart but unassuming brown costume which somehow seemed to have the words "efficient housekeeper" invisibly written all over it, laughed. Jane watched her doubtfully.

"I hope you won't all feel too funny in 'em, Mrs. Clover," she said.

"Of course we'll feel funny in them," replied Lucy, "though not half as funny as we'll look, I can promise you!" Before Jane could protest, she added, "But why should *you* think we'll feel funny in them, Jane?"

Jane hesitated, before replying with her customary frankness:

"Well, if you want the truth, I jest can't seem to make you all out!"

"What's wrong with us?" asked Madeleine, trying on a pale cream apron.

"I didn't say nothing was wrong with you," answered Jane, "I jest said I couldn't make you out, and no more I can! See, you're—you're all so different to the other lot."

"Well, I gather we're intended to be."

"That's right. They've gone and you've come. But to look at some of you—not meaning any rudeness to the rest—I shouldn't of thought—oh, well, it's none of my business, and one thing I *do* know—however funny it is, it's going to be nicer working with you than with them others." She turned back to Lucy. "Of course, *you* don't have to wear a cap or apron, but I expect Miss Trent'll be expected to, like me, if she don't mind."

"She won't mind in the least," Madeleine promised.

"Sure, we'll none of us mind," seconded O'Hara, studying his appearance through a mirror in a chef's white hat. "'Tis only right and proper to look our parts."

"It's rather a pity we can't go all the way," said Jerry. "I'm sure Smith ought to have side-whiskers!"

"Well, that *could* be managed," answered Lucy, thoughtfully. "I decided I'd come prepared for anything, and I've brought my old theatrical make-up box."

Smith looked a little apprehensive, while Jerry responded, "No, by Jove! Have you?"

Lucy nodded. "And it includes crepe-hair!"

"Crepe-hair!" exclaimed O'Hara. "Would ye have a morsel of black, now, for a nice continental moustache?"

"But how did *you* come to need crepe-hair on the stage?" asked Jerry.

"That wasn't for the stage," replied Lucy, "it was for a Chelsea Arts Ball when I went as Charles the Second."

The idea, once born, grew. By tea-time it had blossomed. When tea was carried into the drawing-room on two silver trays by Madeleine and Smith, the former in her neat maid's costume and the latter in a terribly respectable black suit, Sir Walter and Lady Cresswell exchanged glances.

"Do we wait, my lady?" asked Madeleine primly, after the trays had been deposited.

"Not this afternoon, thank you, Madeleine," answered Lady Cresswell.

"Nor me, neither?" enquired Smith.

"No, thank you, Smith."

Trying to conceal their disappointment, the new domestics left the room, and when the door was safely closed Sir Walter raised his eyebrows.

"Did you notice that?" he asked.

"Notice what?" responded Lady Cresswell, momentarily refusing to admit that she knew very well what he had noticed.

Sir Walter frowned.

"Smith's side-whiskers. I don't recall that he arrived in side-whiskers!"

"Surely, he must have," remonstrated Lady Cresswell, gently, "if he has got them now. Do they grow as quickly as all that?"

Sir Walter regarded her suspiciously.

"And the parlourmaid," he went on. "Miss Trent——"

"Madeleine," corrected Lady Cresswell. "Did we call Bella Miss Brown?"

"Eh? Yes, of course! Madeleine. Didn't she look a bit anaemic?"

Lady Cresswell considered.

"Well, I wouldn't say *anaemic*, exactly—but she certainly arrived, I thought, with more complexion."

"Yes," grunted Sir Walter. "The complexion's come off and the side-whiskers have come on!"

"We did mention our dislike of make-up, dear——"

"I know we did, but we didn't mention any affection for mutton-chops!" He took his cup from her, and stared at it.

"Are they going to make fun of us?"

Lady Cresswell replied calmly, "I'm not quite sure yet. But they've certainly served the tea very well."

"They won't serve many more if they make fun of us!"

"No, that would be a pity, but perhaps we shouldn't make up our minds too soon. We must remember that this is a new experience for them, and just at first they may find it a little difficult to—to—what is the word I want?"

"Become acclimatised, eh?"

"Yes, that's the word. Acclimatised. You see, they've never known the real thing, Walter, as you and I have. They've only read of it in books, or seen it on the stage. We must give them a little time—and ourselves, too. We'll know before long." She smiled. "Meanwhile, you know—Smith's side-whiskers *did* look rather nice, didn't they? Jarvis used to have them, you remember."

"Jarvis!" murmured Sir Walter, reminiscently. "Jarvis! Yes—old Jarvis had 'em."

"And Madeleine was certainly an improvement on Bella."

"You've said it!"

"My dear!"

Sir Walter looked aghast at himself.

"Damn these modern expressions!" he fumed. "You catch 'em quicker than measles! I caught that one from Bella when I once mentioned to her that it looked like rain. Queer thing! In our day servants were worth twice as much, and you only paid them half!"

"That's quite true," nodded Lady Cresswell, thoughtfully. "Perhaps if we'd paid them a little more, they'd have stayed the same. Sometimes I wonder whether rich people didn't miss their chance."

"Nonsense, nonsense!" retorted Sir Walter. "They were happy enough! Take your mind back fifty-five years, when I brought you back here after our honeymoon! Was anything wrong with it—*anything*? Are you going to tell *me* the servants weren't as happy as we were—and a dashed sight happier than they are today? Of course they were. We were a community. We made something. We *meant*

something! Equality! Bah! There's no such thing! Give us all the same income and will that make King George like his coalman? Not in a hundred generations! You could as easily flatten the world as humanity! And, good God, how *dull*! We want all sorts—and every sort good!"

"Well, don't get excited, dear."

"Who's excited?"

He glared out of the window. The summer stillness was broken by a drone in the sky, and an aeroplane swooped through the blue in a series of strange loops. It left a white trail that spelt the words, "SUPLEX SOAP."

"Well, if we can't stop what goes on in the air," muttered Sir Walter, "we can at least control what goes on in our own little bit of ground!"

"We haven't been controlling it very well lately," his wife reminded him.

"No, but we're going to now! Oh, and here's something we didn't mention. On their nights out we're not going to have them gallivanting twenty miles in that car they've brought to see smutty revues where girls undress for five to fifty pounds a week, according to the number of clothes they're willing to take off! And coming back at all hours in the morning!"

He twisted his head round.

"You don't agree with me?"

"I was just wondering," answered Lady Cresswell, "about those revue girls, and whether your Empire high-kickers were any better?"

"Mine?" queried Sir Walter. "Why mine?"

"Did you ever go gallivanting to see *them*?"

"What? Yes, of course I did! And got properly strapped when I returned!"

"And did the strapping stop you?"

"If it didn't stop me," Sir Walter retorted, "at least it gave me a respectable sense of guilt!" His glance strayed

to the window again, to rest on a green-aproned figure moving among the roses. "Ah, there's our new gardener. Now I wonder how *he's* going to turn out?" He watched him for a minute with curiosity. "Well, he seems interested enough, anyway."

"Do drink your tea, dear," said Lady Cresswell. "It's getting cold."

William Fingleton was more than interested. Behind his green apron he was absorbed. A dream had come true, and he was doing the work he loved best—or second-best, for nothing would ever exceed the unattainable glory of the violin—with a free conscience. More than that, he was being *paid* for it. On some date as yet unspecified, he would receive remuneration for weeding rose-beds, picking the dead blooms from canterbury bells, and straightening noble hollyhocks. It really did seem divinely silly—getting money for doing what you wanted!

Unconscious that he was being watched, he himself was watching two others out of the corner of an eye. The under-gardeners were moving with horticultural slowness about another bed, and presently one of them spat a cigarette-end from his mouth into a clump of blue delphiniums.

"Hey!" called Fingleton.

The expectorator looked up.

"Pick up that cigarette-end!" ordered Fingleton.

The other under-gardener spat out his cigarette-end. Authority tottered. Was it to die at birth? Fingleton cleared his throat and strode over, armoured by his green apron.

"Now, listen," he said. "Who's the head gardener here? You or me?"

After a heavy silence, the men agreed that he was.

"Very good," went on Fingleton. "I've been having a look round, and there's a lot wants doing to this place, but I'm not blaming you for that. The one to blame is whoever was head gardener before me. Is that right, or isn't it?"

After another silence, not quite so heavy, they again agreed that it was.

"Would that be because he was responsible?" then asked Fingleton.

Once more they agreed that it would be.

"Very well," said Fingleton. "I'm responsible for those cigarette-ends, and if you won't pick them up, I must."

He stooped and did so, pinched them out, and dropped them into a wheelbarrow.

Syd and Harry watched him with uneasy interest. Queer bloke! But you couldn't exactly pick holes in anything he'd said.

"What's a cigarette-end?" demanded Syd suddenly, feeling that despite logic they were being rather too easy.

"A cigarette-end is a cigarette-end," replied Fingleton, refusing to desert the logical path, "and two cigarette-ends are two cigarette-ends, and forty cigarette-ends are forty cigarette-ends. I've picked about forty out of that yellow rose-bed over there."

"There's too much work here for three," said Harry.

"So why make more?" enquired Fingleton. Then he smiled. "Yes, I agree there's a lot of work for three, but I'd rather have too much than too little. You know, we can get this place looking a dream if we put our backs into it. There's nothing wrong with those sweet peas over there. I've never seen finer!"

"That's 'Arry's job," mentioned Syd, generously.

"Then I congratulate you, Harry," said Fingleton. "Yes, indeed! Wonderful blooms—and I didn't notice a single pod among 'em. Er—let's show what we can do, shall we? I shall need all your help, you know."

They watched him return to the yellow rose-bed. They winked at each other.

"What d'you make of 'im?" asked Harry.

"There's another cigarette-end," grinned Syd.

They stooped simultaneously.

In the scullery, Tonsil and Jane were washing-up. Tonsil had endeavoured at first to show Jane that he knew a bit, and had proudly wiped two tea-plates at a time, secretly terrified that they would slip. But Jane had laughed at him, and asked why he didn't put them in the drainer, and after one or two other failures to impress her he had given up trying to teach, and had set about learning.

"You'll soon get used to it," Jane promised him, kindly. "I can see you're quick."

"Not so quick as you," returned Tonsil, giving compliment for compliment. "The way you woosh through things is a fair treat!"

"Well, I've always had to be nippy," she answered. "See, after mother died I had to look after seven."

"Seven what?"

"Seven what? Not baby elephants! Brothers and sisters, of course."

"Go on!"

"And weren't they a handful! I was glad when an aunt come along and I could go out into service. What were you before you came here?"

"I worked in an office," said Tonsil.

"Manager, or sticking on stamps?" enquired Jane. They grinned at each other. "'Nuff said! How do you think you're going to like it here?"

"O.K."

"You may find it a bit dull like."

"I'm not saying I wouldn't if you'd left along with them others."

"Don't talk silly!"

"It's a fack!"

"Well, I said you was quick, Bob, but don't go too fast or you'll get there before you start. Mind with that cup, it's not made of cast-iron!"

He stopped gouging it with the tea-cloth and returned to gentler treatment.

"And another thing," said Jane. "When you're polishing cups, you don't have to breathe on them like boots."

On the other side of the wall, O'Hara and Lucy were studying the contents of a capacious larder. It was, they decided, a very unsatisfactory larder, and after they had completed their examination, and had noted what was there and what was not, they regarded each other with questioning eyes.

"Do you know what I'm thinkin'?" said O'Hara.

"I know what *I'm* thinking," replied Lucy, "and I expect it's the same!"

"Would it be, then, that there's quite a lot of things some members of the late staff won't have to buy for a considerable while?"

Lucy nodded, and gazed at the long list she had made of larder requirements.

"I wonder if Lady Cresswell knows?" she said.

"If she doesn't, she won't fall down in surprise when you tell her," O'Hara answered confidently. "Wouldn't you have thought they'd have left just a morsel of sauce now? 'Tis nothing tasty I'll be giving you all tonight!"

"I hope Lady Cresswell's going to be generous with the housekeeping money," remarked Lucy. "I'll need a bit to stock up!"

"When are ye seeing her?"

"Some time after tea. I suppose the tradesmen call?"

"It'll be divil a walk for the mornin' kippers if they don't! Who is it arranges the meals, now? You in your brown dress or me in me white hat?"

"If you want to I'm sure I've no objection."

"We'd better work them out together." He laughed. "Ah, 'tis a mad thing I'd led ye all into, but sure I'm rather likin' it! Let's hope Mr. Bloggs isn't goin' to hang round and

spoil it, for 'tis the peaceful life we're after, and the very sight of him is like a red rag to a bull. The lies of him! We'll have him for slander as well as the rest when we catch him. Have ye heard anything from Mr. Gem?"

Lucy shook her head. "No. And I'm rather worried."

"Why worried?"

"Well, I thought I would have by now."

"What was the arrangement, did you say?"

"We were to report to each other when we had any more news, and I want to let him know what Mr. Bloggs told Sir Walter and Lady Cresswell about us——"

"Ah, that was bluff——"

"Of course, but I don't like the idea of him running around loose. What we need is a proper chat with Mr. Gem—to know just where we stand and what we've got to do. Listen! Was that a bell?"

The summoning sound tinkled through the passage.

"Mebbe that's him," said O'Hara.

"Or perhaps it's for me," suggested Lucy as they went to see which of the long row of bells was wobbling. The re-introduction of the original bells had been another of Sir Walter's Victorian brain-waves.

It was the front door bell, as Jane informed them from the scullery. Madeleine heard it also, and came running down from her room where, while arranging her things, she had made a thrilling discovery. In the small cupboard—she had had to shove a washstand aside to open it—she had found a blue crinoline dress. But she forgot the dress as she ran downstairs, wondering, "Who's it going to be this time—am I in for another shock?" At the foot of the stairs she collected herself, and completed the journey to the front door with a decorum more fitted to her part.

The visitor, this time, was a small rather birdlike elderly man. He had alighted from a neat black car, and he gave her a quick shrewd glance as she opened the door.

"Sir Walter and Lady Cresswell at home?" he asked, his tone suggesting a routine remark rather than an enquiry.

"Yes, sir," answered Madeleine, for the first time almost feeling like a parlourmaid. The costume helped. "What name shall I say?"

"Dr. Orvil," replied the visitor, "but you needn't trouble—I know my way." About to move past her, he paused. "The new parlourmaid, eh?"

"Yes, sir," admitted Madeleine, demurely.

"Arrived this morning, isn't that so?"

"Yes, sir."

He looked at her appraisingly, while Madeleine wondered whether he had the right to cross-examine her, and whether it would be reasonable to be slightly indignant. But, to her surprise, she felt no indignation. She liked the doctor's appearance, and he seemed to like hers.

"And—er—how did you find them when you arrived?" he said. "Your new master and mistress—eh?"

"They seemed very well, sir," she responded. "They are now at tea."

"Tea. Good! But I have not come to tea, so we won't need another cup." After a moment's hesitation he went on, "As I am an old friend of theirs I hope you will forgive a word of advice. If you find them a trifle—unusual, eh?—don't mind—don't worry about it. Just take them as they are."

"We like them as they are, sir," answered Madeleine.

Now Dr. Orvil looked at the new parlourmaid very hard indeed. Then he nodded, smiled, and went into the drawing-room.

Madeleine did not return to her room, tempted though she was by the blue crinoline dress. She went below to study the pantry, and when the drawing-room bell rang she tossed with Smith, and the coin decided that he should

answer it. He came back with a tea-tray, looking rather agitated.

"What's up?" asked Madeleine. "Did you break something?"

"No," he answered. "But—well, I'm not sure if these side-whiskers wasn't a mistake."

"Oh, no, Smith! They look lovely!"

"P'r'aps they do, miss——" He paused. Should he call his fellow servant "miss?" He admitted to himself that he really wasn't sure what anybody should call anybody. "P'r'aps they do, but—well—Sir Walter drew the visitor's attention to 'em."

"No! Really?" exclaimed Madeleine. "Oh, do tell me! What did he say?"

"He said," answered Smith, "'Oh, doctor,' he said, 'I want you to see my new butler's siders,' he said, 'he must use some remarkable hair tonic, they grow like mushrooms.'"

Madeleine shrieked with joy.

"What did you do?" she asked.

"I don't rightly remember," replied Smith, "but I take some credit that I didn't drop a tea-cup. Yes, and now I've got to go back for the other tray!"

"Wait! I'll call Mrs. Clover and get her to hatch you a beard!"

Smith fled.

They had been at Cresswell Hall less than half-a-dozen hours, but already they were taking it to their hearts and were experiencing a queer sensation that they belonged to it. This sensation seemed without rhyme or reason, for with the possible exception of Smith, who had excellent qualifications for butlering even without side-whiskers, none of the n were indigenous to the place, the soil, or the atmosphere. Madeleine had a strange feeling, however, that she had been there before—either at the Hall or at some spot like it—and later in the day, when the anxieties of the first dinner were over

and evening light began to settle on the garden, she spoke of this to Tim O'Hara. They were standing outside the garden door, watching Fingleton's figure in the distance. The scent of stock and tobacco-plant rose to them like a fragrant evening mist.

"It's just—extraordinary," said Madeleine.

"What's extraordinary?" asked O'Hara.

"This! Everything! Us!"

"Well—'tis certainly a new experience."

"No—that's what I *mean*—it doesn't *seem* like a new experience!" exclaimed Madeleine. "Of course, being a parlourmaid—answering bells—all that's new. But not all the rest. Do you get it, Tim—or don't you?"

Tim O'Hara's natural expression was gay, but now, as he took out his cigarette-case and offered it, his eyes were solemn.

"How about tellin' me, in case I don't?" he suggested.

She did not answer until she had taken a cigarette and he had lit it. She watched the first faint blue puff of smoke melt into the air.

"I'm not sure that I can tell you, Tim," she said. "I'm not clever with words—unless they're slang ones—though probably I couldn't describe what I'm feeling, anyhow. You see, I don't know whether it's just this place, or something bigger. Temporary or permanent." She gave a quick self-conscious laugh. "You see, it's no good."

"It seemed to me quite good" said O'Hara. "Maybe I'm understanding you more than you think. Would it be a sort of—well—recognition, now?" She stared at him in astonishment. "Oh, don't make the mistake of thinkin' I'm bein' intelligent or original. I've read some of Priestley's plays, though I've never seen one."

"I Have Been Here Before!" she exclaimed.

"I've read that one," he nodded.

"Did you believe it?"

"Wasn't it just a play?"

"Don't be an idiot!"

"Of course I believed it. Bein' Irish—did ye know that, now?—I believe in fairies."

She turned away impatiently. "Tim O'Hara, ye've said the wrong thing," he told himself. He tried to retract, while remaining truthful.

"If ye want the fact of it, me dear," he said, "I've no notion what I believe at all, at all! Sometimes I'm thinkin' that when we die we bounce into something else, and there's other times when I'm thinkin' we bump into nothing—and there's a sort of comfort, even in that."

She turned back, smiling.

"Sorry, Tim. I'm in a funny mood tonight. I don't seem to be the same person—quite—who sat in the office of Spare Parts Limited nibbling a pencil. For that matter, we none of us do. Could we have had this conversation, for instance—I mean, one like this—in that hateful place?"

"And would ye have ever thought," said O'Hara, "to see dry, worried old Fingleton in a green apron makin' love to the roses? But we made a team even in Spare Parts Limited, you'll not be forgettin'——"

"A team with nothing to pull!"

"Ah, that was the trouble. Here 'tis different. Though divil a queer thing it is we're pullin'."

"Two nice old people."

"Ay—pullin' them backwards!"

"If—there is any backwards?"

O'Hara grinned. "I've read Dunn, too—but that's not sayin' I've understood him. . . . Well, you're glad you came, anyway? It wasn't a mistake I made, rushin' up here afther that advertisement?"

"I can't bear to think where I'd have been at this moment, if you hadn't!" she answered.

The happiness of the answer passed into him.

"Do ye know what I'm thinkin'?" he said. "There's just one thing that's needed to make this perfect."

"What's that, Tim?"

But he shook his head.

"I'll not name it." He changed the conversation as another figure came round an angle of the house. "I must go in and start the porridge for the mornin'."

He went inside, and Jerry drew up.

"Hallo, Jerry!" greeted Madeleine, and then looked at him more closely. "Is anything the matter?"

"No—I don't think so," Jerry answered.

"How about thinking again?" she suggested. "You look like the end of a wet day."

Jerry certainly looked worried, and he felt as worried as he looked. But the reason either evaded him, or was not of a kind he wished to probe.

"Do I?" he replied. "Perhaps it's reaction, or I'm not properly acclimatised yet. I certainly feel like a fish out of water. Matter of fact," he went on, "I haven't really found my particular water yet."

"What have you been doing?" she asked.

"That's just it. I've not been doing anything. I've been wandering about the estate, noting things without the least idea what I've been noting them for. You've all got definite jobs. I don't seem to have. Any more than I had in Spare Parts Limited. What the hell *does* a steward do?"

"You'll find out soon, Jerry," said Madeleine, sympathetically. "Didn't Sir Walter say he was going to have a talk with you tomorrow?"

"Yes, and I hope it'll be early. I've a horrible fear I'm going to make a mess of this, Madeleine, while the rest of you aren't. I ought to have stuck to my job—at this moment I feel I could bring the house down as the Second Grave-digger!"

"You're all right," she smiled. "You haven't lost your

sense of humour." She did not add that, unlike Tim O'Hara, he had little to lose. "What you need at the moment is a cigarette. Fish one out, and light it from mine."

She kept hers between her lips as he did so. For an instant their faces glowed close. She drew her head away rather quickly.

"You're a nice girl, Madeleine," he said. "Do you know it?"

"Afraid not," she returned, "but one lives and learns. I may become one perhaps when all this has soaked into me."

"All what?"

"This!" She waved her hand around. "I hope you're going to love it, too, Jerry. Nothing lasts for ever—and this won't. To me it's like—what? I don't know. An oasis in the desert of time. Does that mean anything, or is it just silly? It's just silly. But while we're here I want to sink down right into it, and let everything else close over my head!"

"My God!" murmured Jerry, and stared at her.

"What?" she asked, startled.

"I don't know. Yes. *You!* You're different—or haven't I ever really seen you before?"

He took a sudden step towards her, but she pushed him gently away.

"No, darling, please!" she begged. "Lady Cresswell didn't mention it, but I don't think I'm allowed followers."

The momentary spell was broken. He flushed hotly.

"It mightn't be a bad idea," he exclaimed, "if you stopped calling me darling until you mean it!"

He swung round and began to move away; but he was back the next moment.

"I'm sorry, Madeleine," he apologised. "That was rotten of me."

She shook her head.

"It wasn't. I understand. You can kiss me, if you like."

But now he controlled the impulse.

"No—it would be like your darlings," he answered. "It wouldn't mean anything."

He turned again, more slowly this time, and walked away. Madeleine knew now exactly what was the matter with him.

An hour later she had climbed the back staircase to her little attic room, and was drifting into dreams of crinolines, while Smith, after writing an eye-opener to his sister in London, was carefully removing his side-whiskers. Whatever the morrow's decision, at least one need not sleep in them!



CHAPTER XIII

THE NEW LODGE-KEEPER

FOR THREE days nothing happened to disturb the perfect peace of Cresswell Hall, and during those three days everything contributed to the sensation that time was in reverse. The seven members of the new staff slipped into their parts with surprising ease, and if there were variations in the extent to which they fitted their roles,—Jerry Haines, for instance, admitted that he never really felt like a steward, and Fingleton could never get quite used to his green apron—they adopted them with complete enthusiasm. Smith, retaining his side-whiskers—he donned them each morning like his collar—became an excellent butler, and this was not merely because he had once been an excellent batman. The ghost of the long-departed Jarvis entered into his spirit, presiding over his duties, his diction, and his deportment. O'Hara swore that, when he retired to his room after the day's labours, cooks of the past processioned by his bed; and if most of them were feminine and stoutish, there was one persistent fellow who wore a chef's costume which might well have been the very costume O'Hara donned each day himself. This chef of the past did not possess O'Hara's ebullient zest; in fact, he seemed a little sad; but that might have been because he now lacked his original robust substance, and it is difficult to be completely gay in two dimensions. In the spectral hours, O'Hara received some wonderful culinary tips.

Lucy Clover, in her rather stiff brown dress, ceased to be an ex-chorus girl, and became a quietly efficient lady who would have been shocked at high kicks and roundly boxed anybody's ears who had asked her out to supper. Looking

back on it all later, she could hardly believe how successfully she had shed her former self. But with Madeleine Trent the transformation was even more complete, and something entered into her, or a latent unrealised seed found its favourable environment, that was destined to lead to astonishing happenings. Queer sensations stirred within her, strange impulses that were incoherent and seemed at first to belong to someone else till their fantastic reality caused her to claim them for her own. Often in the middle of her work she became dreamy until she found O'Hara's or Jerry's eyes upon her, or Lucy's words of mock severity, "Now, then, my girl, get on with it!" brought her out of her reverie.

It must not be thought that Madeleine's transformation was to become permanent. This is not the story of a girl who drifted from the present to the past and stayed there. But Madeleine did make some self-discoveries that remained with her afterwards, and that often quite inconveniently acted as a brake on her normal modern tendencies; and during this period she found herself responding eagerly to the beckoning of a former age. The crinoline dress in the forgotten cupboard played its part.

This, to Jerry and O'Hara, had its disadvantages, for it weakened their own beckonings, and O'Hara once voiced a complaint, invading the pantry for that purpose. He was at a momentary disadvantage, in that his face was thinly coated with flour. Excellent cook though he was, he had never acquired the art of keeping his ingredients from his person.

"Madeleine," he said, "I'm wantin' a word with ye."

"What?" replied Madeleine, abstractedly.

"There ye are, first go!" he exclaimed. "Are ye never goin' to hear a remark the first time?"

"I'm sorry," she apologised, shortening her focus as she brought her eyes away from the window. The pantry had

a view of a lavender walk that led to a miniature lake. "What did you say?"

"I said I was wantin' a word with ye," repeated O'Hara, patiently, "and here's another thing. It might be less reprehensible of ye if ye paid no attention to me because you were payin' attention to your work! But, faith, what did I find while standin' at the door for well nigh five minutes, but you starin' out of the window when you should be puttin' the china away, or gettin' it out, or doin' whatever it is you are paid good wages to do!"

"And are you paid good wages for standing in doorways for five minutes with your face all over flour?" answered Madeleine, primly. "It's not *your* place to criticise me, Mr. O'Hara, I'm sure, and my lady told me only this morning that I was giving *every* satisfaction."

"Did she that?" grinned O'Hara. "Well, 'tis less satisfaction ye may be givin' to others."

"Meaning yourself, Mr. O'Hara?"

"Meanin' meself, though not only meself, Miss Trent. Sure, 'tis very nice here, as I told one of me ghostly predecessors at 1 a.m. this mornin' after bein' asked how I liked me place, but—ah, begorrah!"

"Most lucid, Mr. O'Hara."

"Now, that's enough o' Mr. O'Hara! Me name's Tim, and yours is Madeleine, and we're livin' in the reign of good King George, remember, and 'tis all tied up we'll be if ye forget it."

"Nonsense! Aren't we being paid those good wages you've just mentioned to forget it? And wasn't it you who came along here first and guaranteed that we *would*?"

"I know that, I know that, ye've no need to remind me," retorted O'Hara, "and 'tis a good show we're all makin'. But there's such a thing as overdoin' it. 'Twas Jerry said only today, 'What's happened to Madeleine, sure I can't talk to her like I did——'"

"I'm certain he didn't say 'Sure I can't talk to her,'" interrupted Madeleine, "and is it so important to me what Jerry says, anyway?"

"Then here's what *I* said," went on O'Hara, doggedly, "if that weighs any more. "'Tis not only you, me lad,' I said, 'she's fadin' into the past so quickly that soon she'll be nothin' but a history book! I'm jest longin' for the day when I once more hear her say "bloody!"'"

Madeleine frowned. She did not habitually employ the sanguinary adjective, but her ears had become acclimatised to it, and in common with the modern practice of her kind she did not hesitate to use it when lurid emphasis was demanded. Now, for the first time for many years, it gave her a shock. Was she reverting to an old ideal of language as well as of thought and behaviour? With her eyes again on the lavender walk outside the window, she fought against an uncomfortable sense of prudishness. She knew that O'Hara was right, and that she was not now the good companion she used to be. Used to be? Had been only two or three days ago! She was living in a dream, and her companions now were of the substance of dreams. There was room for neither Jerry nor O'Hara in that lavender walk. But she wished O'Hara had not reminded her of it.

"Don't worry," she answered. "It'll all work out."

A bell rang. It was from Lady Cresswell's room. Glad of the break, she went up to answer it.

Jerry Haines, making his daily tour of the grounds, was dwelling on the same subject as O'Hara.

After the first day of doubts and indecision, when he had wandered about rather aimlessly while the rest were getting ~~their~~ teeth into their more definite jobs, he had had an interview with Sir Walter during which his own job had been outlined.

"This is not a large estate, Haines," the old man had said, "and you won't be overburdened with work. You have to

keep the accounts, pay the wages—I shall make you out a cheque each week to cover all current expenses with something over to keep in hand—there's a bank in the village, you probably passed it, it opens on Thursdays from ten to one—where am I? Oh, yes. Wages. And keep an eye on things generally. Mrs. What's-her-name—Clover, that's it—Mrs. Clover is responsible for the work and general behaviour of the indoor servants, and you are responsible for the outdoor staff. Oh, and by the way, that reminds me, don't forget during the next few days to look out for a new lodge-keeper. Damn nuisance Hawke walking out on us like that. Then you can stroll round the place, and report to me anything that seems to require doing. The stable may need looking at, now that we are using the victoria again. Get a lodge-keeper who knows about horses and can drive. Sanders only understood cars. Sanders? Did I say Sanders? I meant Hawke. . . . Sanders! Ah, now, if you could find a man like Sanders—yes, but you don't get 'em like Sanders nowadays. Forty years ago motor-cars broke Sanders's heart—I hope they're letting him drive a horse in heaven! Eh? Well, that's all, Thoms. I mean, Haines. No, wait a moment. . . . Yes, that's all."

But he had called Jerry back from the door.

"Ah, I remember! What are you doing about meals? Who are you having 'em with?"

"The staff, sir," Jerry answered.

"Thoms used to have them alone, in his office. You've been told about the office? It is the little room just next to the library. That's your room."

"Thank you, sir, but if you don't mind, I'd rather eat with the others."

"Well, that's as you like. Very good. Don't forget about the new lodge-keeper."

This conversation had shown him the lines he was to follow, and he had been able to map out a daily routine for

himself. In the course of what he called his observation tours he had discovered that the stable door needed rehanging and that an oar was missing from the boat on the lake. These matters had been duly reported, the door had been seen to, and the missing oar had been found. But what he had not found was a new lodge-keeper, and he received no help from the two under-gardeners, Syd and Harry, whom he had consulted in the expectation that they might know of somebody. No, they didn't know of nobody. No, they didn't think anyone else would, neither. Not to come to a place like this, no, they didn't. They even implied that it might not be long before Jerry had to look out for two new under-gardeners, as well! Putting them under an old fossil who was that particular and ordered them about without any knowledge to back it up! From which it may be deduced that Fingleton was not having quite as easy a time of it as he had hoped.

But Fingleton was happy. Unlike Jerry, he had no wish that his work kept him inside with the rest. And, also unlike Jerry, there was nothing in Madeleine's attitude to cause him personal depression. He liked to see her wandering of an evening through the lavender walk and among the roses, looking as though she were a part of it all. If he spoke a word or two to her about the moss on the paths, or the way the goldenrod was coming along, or a nest he'd found in the big oak-tree, she always responded with a smile, and it never seemed as though he disturbed her. But you didn't need to talk in a garden, in Fingleton's view. The flowers talked. In fact, if you talked too much yourself, you couldn't hear them . . .

As Jerry reached the lodge gate, he saw someone in the road, about to pass in. He waited till the man came through, and then asked him what he wanted. The man was on the small side, and wore leggings.

"I've 'eard you want a lodge-keeper," he said.

Jerry's interest quickened.

"Yes, we do," he replied. "Who did you hear from?"

The man blinked, as though the question had been unexpected.

"Oh—these things get about," he answered, casually. "I 'eard that 'Awke 'ad left, and so I thought I'd find out if the job was still open. It's my line o' country."

"What's your name?"

"Charlie. Charlie Green."

"And what was your last job?"

Jerry felt he was being very proficient.

"Devonshire. Exeter. Mrs. John Williams, The Gables, Exeter. Big place. They kep' twenty 'orses, and I 'ad charge of 'em. 'Untin' people. 'Unted with the Exmoor 'Ounds. One time I looked after the lodge there, too."

"Well, that sounds the right sort of experience," said Jerry, "though there's no hunting here, and only one horse instead of twenty. Er—you could drive a victoria, of course?"

"Anything from a go-cart to a coach," asserted the applicant.

"Why did you leave your job in Exeter?"

"They sold the place and went abroad."

"I see." It seemed all right. People often sold places, and people often went abroad. Still, a steward with responsibilities had to be careful. "I see. And the new people didn't keep you on?"

"What new people?" asked Charlie.

"The new people who bought the place?"

"Oh! Them!"

"Well?"

"Why didn't they keep me on? I dunno. Yes, I do. They 'ad their own skivvies. Brought 'em with 'em. From Gloucester. That's where the new people came from. Gloucester. Name of Bloggs."

Curse it! Why had he said that?

"Bloggs?" repeated Jerry, sharply.

"Noggs," came the quick correction. Fortunately for the speaker, his voice had a mumbling quality. "'Enry Noggs. Gloucester people. That was the name. Noggs."

After a moment's pause, during which Jerry studied the applicant and tried hard to like him, he went on.

"And Mrs. Williams is abroad, you tell me?"

"That's right. Paris."

"You know her address?"

"What? Oh, there you beat me, sir. No, I dunno 'er address. I on'y know Paris—I 'eard 'em mention that, but I never 'eard the address."

"Then how can I get in touch with her?" asked Jerry.

"For the character?" enquired Charlie.

His hand dived into his pocket, and he brought out an envelope. "This is it," he said. "Corse she give me a reference."

Jerry took the envelope, extracted a sheet of paper, and read:

"This is to certify that the bearer of this letter, Charles Green, has been in my employment both as coachman and lodge-keeper for a period of six years. He served me faithfully during all this time, and is steady, honest, and sober. A splendid worker, and a man to be trusted in every way. He would be with me still if I had not had to sell my property in Devonshire and go abroad for health reasons."

The signature was "Amelie G. Williams (Mrs.)."

Nothing could have been more laudatory. As a document designed to impress, it fulfilled every requirement, and if health reasons might not normally lead one to Paris, there was no mention of Paris in the testimonial. That had been an inspiration of the steady, honest and sober Charles Green. And, after all, Paris is *en route* for the Riviera.

There was however one little point that, somehow or other, worried Jerry Haines. This may have been because, as

steward of a small estate, it was his duty to look out for trouble.

"How long is it since you left Devonshire?" he asked.

The testimonial had not been dated.

"Oh—let me think," answered Charlie. "Now, let me think! 'Ow long would that be? Well, I'd say it was a matter of some weeks. I ain't quite sure the length of time, but, I'd say—yes, I'd say a matter of some weeks."

"Have you had any other job in between?"

"Well—no."

"How was that? This testimonial ought to have got you a new job easily."

"Ah! I see what you mean. Yes, that's right. It's a good testimonial, ain't it? So why 'aven't I 'ad another job?" The reason came at last. "Well, you see, arter six years, sir, I thought I'd 'ave a bit of a rest. So I stayed with a sister. I mean, brother. I 'aven't got a sister. I stayed with a brother, and then came along 'ere."

"Your brother lives in this district?"

"Oh, no! 'E's in Kent." Suddenly the applicant took out a soiled handkerchief and mopped his brow. "Beggin' yer pardon, sir, but if I do my job as thorough as you do your'n, I'll do it thorough! I s'pose now you want'er know what's brought me from Kent up to Derby?"

Jerry smiled. "Well, I know why you went from Devon to Kent, so we might complete it."

"Quite right. You can't be too careful, sir. I'm careful myself, or I'd be no use as a lodge-keeper. Now, the reason I've come up to Derby, well, I'll tell you. This is the reason. I'll tell yer. I thought I'd got another job near 'ere. It was a mistake. The man I was goin' to replace, 'e stayed on arter all, and the letter tellin' me come jest arter I left my brother in Kent. So, bein' 'ere, I thought I'd 'ave a look round afore goin' back."

"Where was this job?"

"Eh? Oh, at an inn."

Jerry nodded.

"Well, that sounds good enough," he said. "How soon could you start, if we engage you?"

"Sooner the better," replied the man, truthfully. "I've got what I need with me."

"Right. Then take a pew." He waved towards a seat by the lodge. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

Then Jerry returned to the house to report to Sir Walter. Sir Walter listened, seemingly with only half his mind, and told his steward to go ahead and engage the man, if he was satisfied. Jerry wasn't satisfied. He would have been had Sir Walter seen the man himself. But, having reached this point, he could not think of any logical reason for retracting, and the testimonial was undeniably excellent. He read it through again for comfort on his way back to the lodge.

"Well?" said Charlie.

"O.K.," answered Jerry. "You can go and get your things and move in. Our two under-gardeners will be living in the lodge with you, and they'll show you about. Later on, I'll have another chat with you myself. Oh, by the way, we've never mentioned salary."

"I expect that'll be all right," replied Charlie.

Jerry mentioned it. It was all right. The matter was settled.

Trying to feel contented, Jerry Haines went back to the house. He would have found contentment even more difficult than he did had he heard a conversation between the new lodge-keeper and the two under-gardeners before the former retraced his steps to the Red Stag for his belongings.

Syd and Harry had been watching the interview from a distance, and as Jerry drew away, they drew closer. The new lodge-keeper, seeing them coming, awaited their arrival.

"You getting a job here?" asked Syd.

"That's right," answered Charlie, eyeing them speculatively. "I'm the new lodge-keeper."

"I wish you luck," said Harry.

"Thanks," replied Charlie. "We're living in there together, ain't we?"

"Not for long," retorted Syd. "I reckon we'll move out soon after you move in!"

"Meanin'?" enquired Charlie.

"Oh, no offence, mate! But we're fed up! This place is no catch—not if you've got ambition!"

Charlie smiled. He had a way of smiling that could be very expressive. It interested Syd and Harry immensely. So did the words that followed the smile.

"If you two've got ambition, I wouldn't 'and in your notice, not jest yet," said Charlie. "I've got ambition, too. That's why I'm 'ere. And as we'll be livin' together, you two and me, p'r'aps we'll be talkin' about it?"

Then the new lodge-keeper tapped his nose, leaving Syd and Harry blinking as he walked out into the lane.



CHAPTER XIV

DISTURBANCE IN THE NIGHT

ON THE following night peace came to an end.

There were no indications of this when, shortly after ten, the staff of Cresswell Hall trooped up to bed in conformity with the rule of early hours. The rule of "lights out by eleven" was less strictly observed, and more than one defaulter, secure from observation, read in bed by the flickering light of a candle. Tonsil, to his chagrin, had been prevented from this pleasant practice by Smith, and would have given much to have been spared the inconvenience of a roommate. "Now, then, put that light out, young man," Smith had ordered on the first evening, when Tonsil had snuggled cosily against his pillow with a copy of *The Shrieking Skeleton*. "Why? I always read at 'ome," Tonsil had answered. But Smith, severe and adamant, as a butler should be to his inferiors, had retorted, "Well, you're not at home now, and I'll tell you why. First, it's the rule. Second, you've got to be up early in the morning, and you won't do that if you read half the night. Third, I want to get to sleep."

"I won't disturb you," grumbled Tonsil, pinning on the third reason and ignoring the other two, "I don't read aloud!"

"The light disturbs me," said Smith. "Go on! Blow it out! Orders is orders!"

While he blew out his candle and wondered whether he would dare to relight it when Smith started snoring, Jane, happy in more solitude, was snuggling down with *For the Honour of her Form*. Jane was not fond of horrors, and preferred stories in which she could imagine herself as the heroine performing splendid acts. Later on she would clasp Sheiks to her bosom, or just save herself from being dishonoured

by wicked squires, but grand passions were dawning late in her hard-working little body, and now her delight was to be the saviour of her school. Whether these fine and truthful girls of whom she read would ever themselves have read in bed after lights out was a question with which Jane did not trouble herself.

Fingleton was not among the defaulters. He was too tired after his day's horticultural labours, as he had always been after days of adding up figures. But his fatigue at Cresswell Hall was a very different thing from his fatigue at Brown, Holding and Temperence. He climbed into bed gloriously tired, and was asleep in five minutes, dreaming of giant hollyhocks or prize carnations. Jerry and O'Hara also blew out their candles well before eleven, and no spying eye would have detected yellow cracks beneath their doors. But Lucy Clover always read in bed. Not only read, but smoked. Her excuse would have run, had she been challenged, "I have been a faithful housekeeper since seven a.m. In bed, till seven a.m. tomorrow, I become again Lucy Clover." She regarded herself as under orders only when she was perpendicular. Horizontal she was her own mistress.

Lucy read anything, and on this particular night she was reading an old copy of the *Strand Magazine* which she had found in a drawer. As she became drowsy, and the print grew filmy, she passed into a preliminary doze from which she was awakened by a little thud. This was a common occurrence. It meant that her book had slipped from her relaxed fingers and had slid from the bed to the floor. She smiled and prepared to put out the light. Then, to her surprise, she found that the copy of the *Strand Magazine* was still in her hands.

"What dropped, then?" she wondered.

She turned her head and peered over the edge of the bed. The floor was innocent of any exotic object. "Imagination," she decided, and, placing the magazine on the little table

by her side, she blew the candle out. Then she heard another little thud.

This, clearly, was not imagination. By a ray of moonlight that slanted in from the window to her bed, she looked at her wrist-watch, and found to her surprise that it was just after midnight. She had dozed longer than she had thought. Slipping from the bed, she went to the door and opened it a crack. Faintly she thought she heard footsteps below.

She put on her dressing-gown hastily, and went out into the passage. The moonlight came through a window at the end, illuminating a part of one wall, while the other wall was in deep shadow. In the illuminated portion was the door of Madeleine's room, next to her own, and as she reached it on her way to the head of the stairs she noticed that it was just ajar. She called through softly.

"Madeleine! Are you awake?"

There was no reply. She pushed the door further open, and poked her head in. Madeleine's bed was empty.

"Oh, dear, what is she up to?" thought Lucy. "This is a nuisance!"

Had Madeleine gone down to the kitchen for something? Perhaps to perform some last duty she had forgotten? The warmth of bed began to draw her back to her room, but she paused when a fresh sound fell upon her ears. Someone was opening a door below.

Now she went to the top of the stairs and peered down. Just beyond was the servants' bathroom. The bend of the stairs shut off her view, and it would only be possible to glimpse the passage below by going down half the staircase to the turn. While she was hesitating, a timid voice spoke behind her.

"What's up, mum?"

It was Jane, the other midnight peruser, in a bright red dressing-gown. In the privacy of her room Jane was partial to a bright colour-scheme.

"Goodness, how you made me jump!" answered Lucy. "I don't know. Probably nothing. But I thought I heard somebody moving about."

"Did you?" whispered Jane. "So did I. P'r'aps it was you?"

"Perhaps, but I heard someone else. Sh! Listen!"

They strained their ears.

"Talk about the silence of the dead!" muttered Jane.

"I'd rather not," returned Lucy. "I expect it's just——"

She stopped short and Jane clutched her arm.

"There it is! Crumbs! Shouldn't we wake one of the males?"

"Wait a moment."

Lucy stole down the stairs as she spoke, and Jane watched her pause at the bend just beyond the moonlight, looking a bit too spectral, Jane thought, for comfort.

"See anything, mum?" she hoarsed.

"No—I think it's lower down. Go back to bed, Jane. I'm sure there's nothing to worry about. Someone's forgotten something, that's all."

She wanted to get rid of Jane without knowing exactly why. But Jane was not to be got rid of, and a few moments after Lucy had vanished round the bend, she came running after her.

"I say, mum——" she began.

But got no further, for now the most definite sound of all came to their ears. It was the sound of somebody sliding down the stairs, followed by a muttered curse.

Hesitating no longer, they ran down the back stairs with fast-beating hearts till they reached the first floor, passing through a confused medley of moonlight and shadow. A faint groan came from the direction of the main staircase. Half-way down that, on the wide half-landing, they came upon the recumbent form of Sir Walter Cresswell.

"Oh, sir! Are you hurt?" gasped Jane.

It appeared at the moment that he was more angry than hurt.

"No, no! Of course not!" he rasped. "Don't make a noise! We—we don't want to wake the whole household!"

Lucy bent down to him.

"Can we help you up, sir?" she said.

"In a moment—it's nothing, I tell you—in a moment. I expect I tripped."

He looked a pathetic figure, for all his crossness, in his striped dressing-gown, from the bottom of which protruded thin bony feet.

"What brought you out of your room?" asked Lucy.

"Eh? Come to that, what brought you out?" He was not being helpful. "Oh, well, I suppose you heard me, as I thought I heard someone else, but I must have been mistaken. Anyhow, I don't want the whole house disturbed. Just help me up, and I'll get back to my room."

They helped him to his feet, and Lucy kept her arm round him as he swayed slightly.

"Just a bump on the head," he grunted. "That's all. It'll pass. Yes, that's much better."

"I think I'd better go and tell the missus," said Jane.

"And give her an unnecessary fright?" retorted Sir Walter. "How many more times——?"

"Very good, sir, we understand," interposed Lucy in a soothing voice, and threw Jane a warning frown. "We'll just help you back to your room, and then you'll tell us if there is anything more we can do for you."

"That's right, that's right," nodded the old man. "Ah! No, no, that was nothing! That's right. Just a tiny bit dizzy. Now, I remember once before, when I tripped on the stairs—of course, that was a long time ago—it was Ursula then who——" He paused and blinked. "Eh? Oh, yes, of course. . . . Now, just keep as we are going . . ."

They assisted him carefully up the stairs, pausing at the top for breath. Though he leaned rather heavily upon them, he insisted that he was not hurt. He kept on insisting, even when nobody said that he was. His room was towards the end of the wide first-floor corridor, and he twisted his head round in the opposite direction for a moment—the direction, Lucy recalled afterwards, of the locked room—before they completed their slow journey. Once he used the name of Ursula again, calling Lucy by it.

But it was in the bedroom itself that the most startling moment occurred. He stood at the window for a few seconds while they got his bed ready for him, and suddenly he exclaimed.

“My God! *There!*”

They ran to him and looked out, but all they saw was the moonlit garden, and he offered no explanation. But some queer tension seemed to have eased in him, and he smiled oddly as they got him into bed.

“Don’t disturb anyone—remember, now, don’t disturb anyone!” he whispered. “I’m quite all right! Quite all right. Don’t disturb anyone.”

They exchanged glances, uncertain what to do. Sir Walter took no further notice of them. In a couple of minutes he seemed fast asleep.

“Shouldn’t we tell Lady Cresswell, spite of his orders?” asked Jane, in a low voice.

“No—I don’t think so,” replied Lucy, after consideration. “We’ll do as he says, and not wake her. But I’m not going to leave him just yet—I’ll stay here a couple of hours to make sure he’s all right, and of course I’ll let Lady Cresswell know in the morning.”

Jane threw her an admiring look.

“See that other housekeeper ever doing that!” she remarked. “But look here, mum, why not let me stay?”

“No, I will. There’s a comfortable armchair.”

"All right, on'y let me know if you want me. And—what about them noises?"

"Yes. What about them, Jane?"

Jane hesitated. "Well—shouldn't we search the house like?"

"Would you like to, Jane?"

"Not me!"

"Then don't let's worry. If I hear them again, I'll shout the roof off!"

Lucy Clover had her theory about the noises, though it was a theory destined later to revision. Jane glanced at the sleeping figure on the bed, shook her head glumly, and moved to the door. There she paused, for one more question.

"What do you suppose he meant when he said that at the window?" she asked.

"I haven't the slightest idea," replied Lucy.

"Well, if you want the truth, I didn't like it," said Jane.
"It made me feel fair goosey!"



CHAPTER XV

SIR WALTER TALKS PECULIAR

LUCY CLOVER stayed in Sir Walter's room all night, and managed to keep awake for the first hour. Then, finding that the old man was sleeping peacefully she gave way to her own drowsiness and, curled up in her exceedingly comfortable armchair, she dozed, waking up periodically with an undeserved sense of guilt. After creeping quietly to the bedside to make sure that all was well, she returned to her chair for another uneasy session of slumber.

She was asleep at six a.m. when Jane stole down from her room, but woke immediately the door was opened and the housemaid's tousled head came through.

"How is he, mum?" whispered Jane.

"He hasn't moved all night," Lucy whispered back. "Look! He's in just the same position as when you left."

Jane squinted across the room.

"So he is! The poor man! And poor you, mum! You can't have had much of a night."

"Oh, I got some dozes."

"Yes, I know you did! I come down an hour ago to see if you was wanting anything."

Jane always minimised her good deeds. She had come down not once but twice with the intention of finishing the vigil herself, but on each occasion Mrs. Clover had looked so comfortable like and was breathing so quiet like that she had decided after all not to disturb her.

"That was nice of you, Jane," said Lucy. "But then you are nice."

"Go on! On'y sometimes. Has he done any talking?"

"Talking?"

"In his sleep, mum. I thought he might. You know—after a bump on the head—and being so old and that."

"If he has I haven't heard him. Is everything all right upstairs?"

Jane nodded. "They're all in their rooms."

"Oh! How do you know that?" asked Lucy. "Can you see through doors?"

Jane grinned. "No, but I can hear through 'em," she answered, "and they was all breathing bar one. It ain't getting-up time not till half-past."

"Which one didn't you hear?"

There was the tiniest pause before Jane responded, "Miss Trent, so I opened the door jest a crack to have a peep, and there she was, sound. Yes, jest as she'd been when I had a check-up after leaving you down here last night."

Lucy looked at her sharply, recalling that Madeleine's bed had been empty, and the door of her room ajar, when she and Jane had descended to the main staircase to find the origin of the commotion. Was Jane speaking the truth? If Madeleine had been sound during Jane's nocturnal check-up, she must have returned to her room very quickly and fallen asleep the moment her head touched the pillow!

"That was a good idea, that check-up of yours," said Lucy amiably, deciding to do a little checking-up herself. "Tell me, did you do anything else after leaving me last night, or did you go straight up to bed?"

"Well, mum," answered Jane, "if you want the truth——"

"I always want that."

"—and you get it from me nine times out of ten—I *did* have a bit of a look round first."

"Oh, *did* you? I thought——"

"I wasn't going to? So did I! But once I got outside I said, 'Who's afraid?' and very soon found out who was! Me! I didn't half enjoy it! Do you know, mum, when I was down in the basement I'd sooner've had it pitch dark,

honest, than all that moonlight! The time for moonlight's when you're sitting on a stile. You know that old meat-jack? In the corner? Well, course, I would go in, wouldn't I, jest when the moon was on it, and if it didn't look like my dead uncle! I had to sit down on the floor, honest I did! And then drip-drip-drip goes the tap, there's someone never turns it off tight, whoever they are I owe 'em one!" Suddenly she clapped her hand over her mouth. "I say, am I talking too loud?"

But Sir Walter heard nothing of Jane's hair-raising adventures. He still lay with the same quiet peaceful expression that he had worn every time Lucy had looked at him.

"You'd better go up and dress now, Jane," said Lucy.

"That's what I come down to let you," answered Jane.

"Thank you, but I'd rather you dressed first. Then you can stay down here while I dress, and afterwards get on with your own work when I'm back again."

"Very good, mum. And—what'll you do?"

"Wait till it's time to go and tell Lady Cresswell."

Jane nodded. "Poor lady, I hope she don't get a shock—mind you break it gentle like—not that you wouldn't. I suppose it's all right for me to tell the others?"

Lucy considered for a few moments.

"If you don't mind, Jane," she decided, "I'd rather tell them first. You see, I want to make quite sure none of them get silly and excited—we must avoid any agitation and keep the atmosphere peaceful—don't you agree?"

Jane nodded solemnly.

"You mean, mum, I'd blurt it out more like it was a melodrama!"

"Who'd blame you if you did?" answered Lucy, smiling. "But I don't mean that. You're much too understanding. What I mean is that it's my responsibility. Of course, after I've come down and relieved you here you can say what you like so long as you don't exaggerate and make too much

of it. Just a moment before you go. I—I suppose, 'while you were going around last night, you didn't find anything more alarming than meat-jacks and dripping taps?'"

"They was quite enough, thank you!" retorted Jane.

Half-an-hour later, when Jane had gone and returned groomed for the morning and with her red hair as tidy as she could ever get it, Lucy went up to her room and dressed quickly. After her disturbed night she would have liked to linger over the operation, but there was no time. She wanted to get the responsibility of her knowledge off her own shoulders. Dressed, she knocked on five doors, calling to those behind them to come to her room the moment they were ready, and then returned and waited. It was clear when they arrived that they knew nothing of the night's disturbances and that Jane had been faithful to her instructions.

"Is it a lecture we're gettin'?" enquired O'Hara.

"No, I've just got something to tell you," answered Lucy, "but first I'd like to know whether any of you heard anything last night?"

"I did!" piped Tonsil, promptly.

"Did you? What?"

Tonsil jerked his thumb towards Smith. "'Im snorin'!"

"Now, then, my lad!" Smith glowered at him. "Don't start getting funny!"

Fingleton cleared his throat.

"I—er—I did wake up once with that feeling one gets sometimes that something had woken me, but though I listened there was no repetition of the sound—always assuming there had been one—so, well, I went to sleep again."

"Do you know what time it was?" asked Lucy.

"Time. No. I'm afraid not, Mrs. Clover."

Lucy turned to Madeleine.

"What about you?"

"I heard nothing," replied Madeleine. "Why did you think I might?"

"Only that when I passed your door I noticed that it was open."

"No, was it? Sometimes it comes unfastened." After a slight pause she added, "Did you look in?"

"Yes."

"And—wasn't I there?" Lucy shook her head. "I expect I was in the bathroom fetching a glass of water."

"Ah, and that could have been what awakened *me*!" exclaimed Fingleton, with the pleasure of one who has checked a column of figures and found them correct. "My room is next to the bathroom. If you turn on the tap too slowly it makes a throbbing sound."

"Yes, but I gather something more important happened than Madeleine's glass of water," remarked Jerry. "Please tell us what it was."

"Yes," answered Lucy, "and Mr. Fingleton is as likely to have heard Jane and me as Madeleine, because we were out on the passage at about the same time. It's funny that——" She did not finish the sentence. Madeleine, watching her, sat very still.

Then Lucy told her story, and while she was telling it she experienced a sense of anti-climax. She did not know that the real climax was coming, and that very shortly. She could not decide whether the sensation were due to the fact that she was deliberately trying not to make too much of the incident, or that because she had made too much of it in her own mind the words sounded tame. After all, what did it amount to? Sir Walter, imagining he had heard noises, got up to investigate, and had been heard himself when he had tripped and bumped his head. . . .

"Poor old gentleman, I hope he ain't bad," said Smith.

"I'm not sure—no, I don't think so," answered Lucy. "He's been very quiet all night."

"Do you mean you've been with him?" asked Madeleine.

"I thought someone ought to."

"I wish I'd known. I'd like to have helped. What about a doctor?"

"Of course I'll advise that when I tell Lady Cresswell. Jane's with him now, and I'm going down again in a minute, but I wanted you all to know what had happened first, in case any of you think there is anything else that ought to be done."

"Well, what about the noises—the ones that brought Sir Walter out of his room?" asked Jerry. "Were *they* traced?"

"Jane had a look round, but didn't find anything," Lucy told them.

"Wish I'd been with 'er!" muttered Tonsil. "Bet I'd 'ave found something!"

"I've no doubt you would," agreed Lucy, "so it's just as well you weren't! By the way, is it you who leaves the scullery tap dripping?"

Tonsil grinned, while his spirit sighed at the glorious chance he had missed. To have searched the house in the dead of night with Jane, him in those striped pyjamas that somehow made him look taller and her in that dressing-gown he'd spotted her in once with her nice hair all over the place, and him with the candle, and her clutching his arm every other minute, and saying, "Goodness! Listen! Is that blood?" And him replying, "Don't be frightened, Jane, that's not blood, it's only a tap, but if it 'ad been blood, well, I'm 'ere!" And then, p'r'aps, her fainting in his arms, and the candle going out, and him having to carry her somewhere. He supposed he could carry her? What did men do if girls fainted and were too heavy? . . .

It was decided that if the sounds which had brought Sir Walter Cresswell out of his bedroom were imaginary there was nothing to do about them, and that if they were not imaginary they had probably been Madeleine going to the bathroom for her glass of water, in which case the only thing

to do about them was for Madeleine to be quieter next time. But on her way downstairs, Lucy wondered why, if Sir Walter's ears were sufficiently sharp to hear all that distance above, he had taken the wrong direction and gone below; and even more she wondered how it was that, during this alleged visit to the bathroom Madeleine had been seen by neither herself nor Jane? Something did not seem to fit somewhere. But did it matter?

Jane turned as Lucy re-entered Sir Walter Cresswell's bedroom and gave a little sigh of relief. Her expression was worried.

"I'm glad you've come, mum," she said. "He's been talking peculiar—about that Ursula again!"

Lucy tiptoed across to the bed, and Jane stood by her anxiously. Sir Walter had only slightly moved from his former all-night position, but his lips were a little apart, and his slumber did not seem quite so sound as it had been.

"Course, he'd stop, soon as you come!" muttered Jane.

"What's he been saying?" asked Lucy.

"You can't tell mostly, mum," replied the girl, "but it made me feel all queer like—do you remember?—like last night at the window. There—now hark at him! He's starting off again!"

The head on the pillow shifted a little, and then came Sir Walter's voice:

"You'll get sunstroke, my dear, sitting there without your bonnet!"

"He's only dreaming," whispered Lucy.

"Yes, well, it's best not to dream after you've had a bump!" responded Jane, grimly. "That kind, you don't snap out of so quick!"

"Ursula! Ursula!" called Sir Walter, softly. "Don't run so fast! I can't keep up with you!"

Then the old eyes opened, and stared upwards.

"Who are you?" snapped Sir Walter at the two faces above him. "Go away! I want Ursula!"

The next instant his eyes were closed again.

"Where are you going?" asked Jane, as Lucy slipped quickly back to the door.

"To tell Lady Cresswell," answered Lucy. "I won't be long."



CHAPTER XVI

SOMETHING WRONG WITH TIME

IT WAS a rule never hitherto broken that Lady Cresswell should not be disturbed until Madeleine brought in her breakfast tray at nine o'clock, at which hour she was always found sitting up in bed with a lace cap on her head, and although this morning Lucy was armed with sufficient excuse for breaking rules she could not dispel a sense of guilt as, two hours before the allotted time, she knocked on the door. Side by side with this, however, was a more disturbing sense that she really ought to have broken the rule before, and that it had been a mistake not to disturb her ladyship at the time of the accident. To her surprise and relief, a brisk voice answered her knock at once.

"Come in!" called Lady Cresswell. "What is it?"

"I am sorry to wake you so early, my lady——" began Lucy, as she entered.

"You haven't woken me, I was already awake," interrupted Lady Cresswell. "Something has happened, hasn't it? I hope it's not bad?"

"No, my lady, or I should have told you before," answered Lucy, seizing on the point. "Just a little accident to—to Sir Walter."

Lady Cresswell nodded, as though she had already known it, and there was a quality in her attitude that claimed Lucy's admiration. But during the past few days there were many things she had come to admire in this staunch Victorian.

"Yes, tell me," she said, "and don't make less of it than it is, or more. I don't faint."

Lucy gave her a quick account of what had happened, and

when she had finished Lady Cresswell already had one foot out of bed.

"I'll go to him at once," she said. "Please hand me my dressing-jacket. Over that chair. Thank you. I suppose you didn't want to disturb my night's rest——"

"Yes, that was why I waited till now. Of course, if he'd been restless, or got worse, I'd have come to you immediately."

"I'm sure you would, and it was very thoughtful of you, very thoughtful indeed. But, my dear, it was a mistake—a well-meant mistake. My slippers. Where——? Ah, thank you. You see, at my age, one must be—indeed, one is—prepared for anything. . . ."

They found Sir Walter sitting up in bed. He was looking a little perplexed and puzzled, and he spoke as soon as his eyes fell on his wife. Jane, standing a little way off, seemed to be trying to efface herself—and she did a moment later, at a sign from Lucy, by slipping out of the door and closing it.

"Ah! Good!" exclaimed Sir Walter. "Don't worry! I fell down stairs, but there's nothing to worry about, nothing whatever."

"In that case, dear, we won't worry," answered Lady Cresswell, quietly. "But the next time you hear noises——"

"Noises? What noises?" interrupted Sir Walter. "I didn't hear any noises!"

"No, dear? I thought——?"

He shook his head impatiently, then raised a hand and rubbed it. The perplexed expression, which had momentarily lessened, returned.

"Well, never mind," said Lady Cresswell. "So long as you are feeling all right, that's all that matters."

He regarded her suspiciously, as a dubious patient regards a soothing doctor.

"I *shall* be all right," he grunted, "but perhaps, just at the moment——" He closed his eyes, and continued so, as though he found sight disturbing: "As a matter of fact,

Cynthia, it did shake me a little—bumped myself, eh?—and—you know how it is—you don't know for a bit whether it's yesterday or tomorrow! Time gets mixed up, eh? You remember that morning Percy fell off the ladder and thought it was tea-time when he hadn't had his breakfast? Someone explained it to me once, Dr. What's-his-name, but I don't remember. . . . Noises? Who said something about noises?"

"Yes, well, I wouldn't talk for a little while, dear," said Lady Cresswell, exchanging glances with Lucy. "Just see if you can get a little more sleep. I'll sit here with you, and perhaps have another little doze myself in the chair."

But Sir Walter disobeyed. Still with his eyes closed, he answered:

"I wanted to have another look at them. They're in the drawer of my desk. We mustn't forget to put them in Ursula's room with the other things—have them there when she arrives, you know. And the flowers. You've seen John about them? Roses, eh? That'll please her best. Roses!"

Now he opened his eyes again, but only for an instant. With a grunt he closed them quickly and turned on his side, his head buried in his pillow.

They waited a few moments. He appeared to have dropped off into another doze.

"He'll be all right, I'm sure, the next time he wakes," Lucy whispered.

"Of course he will," replied Lady Cresswell. "He's had this kind of thing before. All old people . . . Why, before anyone knows it, I may get fluffy myself!"

She was game. Lucy said:

"If I may say so, my lady, I think you're very brave."

"If I may say so," retorted Lady Cresswell, "I think I'm very lucky! Suppose this had happened with the last lot all around me! Now just wait here for a minute or two while I put something more on, and then I want you to send someone for the doctor. Dr. Orvil."

"Shouldn't we telephone?"

"Telephone? You've forgotten!"

Lucy had. The telephone was among the modern conveniences that had been banished. Lady Cresswell continued:

"Tell that new man—what's his name?—oh, Green—yes, tell Green to harness the horse, and he can drive one of you over. Don't let him go alone. I'd rather one of you went with him. But not you. I'd like you to remain here, I think. Yes, anyone else."

A few minutes later Lucy was down in the kitchen, had explained the situation, and had sent Tonsil across to the lodge to tell Charlie to get the carriage ready. When it came to deciding who should accompany the lodge-keeper to the doctor's, Madeleine asked whether she could go. There were other volunteers, and Jerry thought that he could most easily be spared. Madeleine persisted in her request, however, saying she had not slept well and that she felt the drive would do her good. She would soon be back and, refreshed by the early morning air, she would work double as fast to make up for the lost time.

"Come to that," said Jane, "if you're late any I could do your little bit of dusting."

And so it was arranged; and none of them had any prescience of what was to result from that decision.



CHAPTER XVII

ON THE WAY TO THE DOCTOR

As MADELEINE neared the stable she heard Tonsil's eager voice, and it wrenched her back from her momentary joy of the early morning air.

"They say 'e's gorn all backwards!" the boy was exclaiming, with that delight in sensation which overrides sympathy. "Yus, and talks about people what ain't there!"

"How do you know, if *you* weren' there?" came Charlie's response from the stable. "Come up, Dobbin—get yer nose out of the bag!"

"Well, course I wasn't there!" retorted Tonsil. "I'm saying what they say. Oi! Mind out! Do they kick?"

The sound of the horse's hooves as it left its stall was far more melodious to Madeleine than the sound of the human voices.

"You'll find out if you don't keep away from their legs," answered Charlie. "'Ow did it 'appen?"

"What 'appen?"

"The old man getting like that?"

"Oh, 'im." Tonsil's mind reverted from the horse's legs to Sir Walter's head. "Well, see, 'e 'ad a accident. 'E fell down the stairs."

"Yes, yes, so you said," exclaimed Charlie, impatiently, "and that's why I'm being routed out at cock-crow to fetch the doctor, but 'ow did 'e come to fall down the stairs?"

"Oh! Well, keep yer wool on. 'E fell down the stairs 'cos 'e thought 'e 'eard noises."

"Go on!"

"That's right, and Jane and Mrs. Clover come upon 'im and carried 'im back to 'is room, and all the time 'e kep' talkin' like I've told yer."

"Sounds a bit dotty to me!"

The horse's head appeared from the stable, and a moment later the man and the boy after it.

"Yus, if 'e wasn't cracked before, 'e's cracked now," said Tonsil.

"Did they find anything else?" asked Charlie casually.

"Eh? 'Oo? 'Ow d'yer git it between the shafts? Does it go, or do you 'ave to push it?"

"The two what found Sir Walter? Was 'im all they found, or did they find anything else?"

"No, that was all."

"What about them noises?"

"Oh! Jane 'ad a look-see, but she didn't find nothing. Wish I'd been with 'er! I'll bet I'd 'ave found something! See, if there was anybody, they'd jolly soon do a bunk when the old boy comes bumpin' down the stairs, but they might still of been in the grounds. Why, fer all you can say, 'e might 'ave been lurkin' against a wall with a knife, waitin' to come in again——"

Madeleine thought it was time to interfere.

"That's quite enough, Bob!" she called. "Don't keep him talking. We've got to get on."

Tonsil and Charlie looked up, noticing her for the first time.

"Morning, miss," said Charlie.

"Good morning, Charlie," replied Madeleine. "Go back to the house now, Bob, and get busy with the boots."

"I was only jest telling 'im," explained Tonsil.

"Yes, well, now you've told him," nodded Madeleine.

"If there's anything more, I can tell him the rest."

"Boots!" muttered Tonsil. "I fair dreams of 'em!"

As Tonsil turned and began retracing his way slowly to work, Charlie regarded the girl with interest and vague surprise.

"You coming along with me?" he asked.

"Yes." Something in the man's attitude made her add, "Lady Cresswell's orders. Do you know Dr. Orvil's house?"

He shook his head, and she passed on the directions.

"I got it," he said.

"It's about two miles beyond the turning that goes to an inn—the Red Stag."

He looked at her sharply.

"Red Stag," he repeated.

"Perhaps you know *that*?" Madeleine enquired, trying hard not to dislike him. She felt that, however hard up they had been for a lodge-keeper and coachman, she would not have engaged this Charlie Green if she had been Jerry.

"I think I've been by it once," replied Charlie. "Well, we're all ready, miss. If there's that 'urry to move, jump in, and we'll be off."

A few moments later the horse was trotting leisurely from the stable towards the lodge, and a memorable journey had begun.

Madeleine leaned back in her seat, and the sense of enjoyment which had been interrupted by the voices from the stable returned. The crisp morning air was lovely, and the sound of the wheels on the gravel drive, and the rhythmic jog of the horse's hooves, and the twittering of birds in the tall trees, were music in her ears. The aftermath of a strange experience was still upon her, and as she closed her eyes for a few moments in an endeavour to drift back, she wished there had been no trying interruptions and that her spirit could become submerged again in sheer beauty. Moonlight—dark shadows in silver—the scent of roses and lavender—silent shimmering water—the sense of friendly ghosts—the sense that one was a ghost oneself! . . . She thought of Sir Walter with a queer sympathy and affection. Sir Walter, now a doddering old man of eighty, but once as young as she, and with all her vigour and vitality, thinking into the future—though a future so different from hers! And Lady

Cresswell, lovely in crinolines, and with a large black fan, to shield her eyes when they became timid or abashed! All these things were once realities. They were not filmy dreams, they had *been*. If they had gone for ever, then everything would always go for ever, and nothing was permanent or solid. And life itself became a mere pin-point in time, a delusion of transitory consciousness! How little everything seemed to matter—yet how one's heart rejoiced or repined, as though it really did! . . .

The motion of the carriage ceased. A gate clicked, and Madeleine opened her eyes. They had reached the lodge, and one of the under-gardeners was swinging the gate open.

"Up late and out early," called the under-gardener.

"'Oo was out late?" retorted Charlie, scowling.

"Oh! Well, out early, any'ow," grinned the other.

The carriage passed through. The gate swung to and clicked behind them. The journey was resumed, the horse's hooves now making a harder sound on the surface of the road.

The under-gardener looked after them.

"Charlie didn't like that," he said over his shoulder.

"I reckon 'e didn't," answered Harry, behind him. "I reckon it was a silly thing to say."

"Ah! Shucks!" grunted Syd. "Everything's topsy-turvy. Afore long I'll go to Australia or one o' them places, see if I don't."

"Things is more topsy-turvy there," replied Harry. "T'other side of the world you find 'em standin' on their ead!"

"I'd like to stand Pa Fingleton on 'is 'ead!" exclaimed Syd. "See if I wouldn't!"

Harry rubbed his nose with an earth-grimed finger.

"'E's not so bad," he conceded. "If 'e makes us work, 'e works 'iself. Maybe, Syd, 'is kind's better to work for than some other kind?"

"Bah!" retorted Syd. "Watch this!"

He took a cigarette-end from his mouth and snicked it into a pansy bed. Harry laughed and, suddenly following a surprising impulse, walked to the pansy bed and picked up the cigarette-end.

"What's that for?" demanded Syd.

"You ain't finished it," smiled Harry, and put it between his lips.

Fifty yards along the road, Charlie turned in his driver's seat.

"That Syd likes his little joke," he said.

"Oh! I didn't notice it," answered Madeleine.

"Oh, then that's all right, then."

"What was the joke?"

But Charlie wished he hadn't spoken.

"What ain't noticed don't matter," he grunted. "Come up, Dobbin! Sooner you get there, sooner you'll be 'ome."

Madeleine gazed at Charlie's back curiously.

"Do you mean what he said about being up late and out early?" she asked.

"I thought you didn't hear," replied Charlie.

"I heard that, but it didn't strike me as particularly funny. Then you weren't up late?"

"Why should I be?"

"Disagreeable man!" reflected Madeleine as she retorted, "I didn't say you should be, but it seems to worry you." And then, as a thought came to her, unconscious of its consequences she added, "What made Syd think you were?"

"What made what?"

"I said, what made him think you *were*? I suppose you're quite sure you *weren't*—up late last night?"

Charlie swung round again. His voice was heavy and indignant, and his expression was ominous.

"What makes *you* think I was?" he exclaimed.

"Don't be rude, Charlie," frowned Madeleine, now indignant herself. "But *someone* was up late, and *out* late, and I thought I——"

She stopped abruptly. Charlie's unpleasant eyes bored into her.

"You thought you—*what?*" he demanded.

"Never mind!" snapped Madeleine:

"Oh! Well, p'r'aps I do mind! I don't like insinuations, and I certainly ain't going to take 'em from blinkin' 'ouse-maids! You thought you *what?* Were *you* up late last night, Miss Nosey-parker? Eh? Were *you?*"

There were challenge and enmity, and sudden uncomfortable knowledge, in the long gaze that ensued between these two. Then Madeleine said:

"The horse seems to know the way, Charlie, but I expect you'd better attend to it unless we're to end up in a ditch."

Charlie's tongue came out to moisten his lips. He did not reply, but swung back in his seat and gave the horse a flick with the whip.

The journey continued in silence. Each was thinking hard, and each would have given much to have known the other's thoughts. Presently, during a stiff ascent, Charlie pulled the right rein and the horse turned off the main road into a twisting lane, and as they mounted higher Madeleine caught a glimpse below of a fast-running stream. It was flowing through a narrow valley, and the sound of the tumbling waters came faintly up to them.

"Is this the way?" she asked.

"I know where I'm going," answered Charlie.

"I didn't think we had to leave the main road," she said.

"Short cut," he replied. "This saves half a mile."

It occurred to Madeleine that for one who had professed his ignorance of local geography, Charlie Green was gaining new knowledge rather surprisingly, but possessing no local knowledge herself she was not going to argue with him and risk putting herself in the wrong. The twisting lane continued to mount. The pace of the horse grew slower. They were now right above the narrow valley with the stream.

"The distance may be shorter," she remarked, "but at this pace I don't think we're saving any time."

"That's not my fault," answered Charlie, shortly. "Look at the horse."

"What's the matter with it?"

"Dunno. I think a shoe's loose."

They stopped, and he jumped into the road. Walking to the horse's head, he stared at it, and then stooped and gazed at one of the legs.

"Hey! Will you give me a hand?" he called. "I want to have a look at this."

"Does it need two?" she enquired.

"I just want you to stand in front of her while I lift her hoof."

Madeleine got out of the carriage.



CHAPTER XVIII

BREAKFAST FOR TWO

MR. BLOGGS and Bella were having breakfast in their bedroom. Regretfully it must be recorded that it was the same bedroom, but some amelioration may be found in the fact that they were not breakfasting in bed. They sat at a small octagonal table, its wicker surface concealed under a not over-clean cloth, by a little window overlooking an ill-kept garden where a few dejected hens were scratching about for their own morning meal. The man and the woman who occasionally peered out at the hens did not look much less dejected.

"What's biting you?" demanded Bella, suddenly breaking a silence.

"Plenty," answered Mr. Bloggs.

"P'r'aps there's plenty biting me, too," replied Bella. "I thought you was going to be fun!"

"The fun will come."

"So will Christmas! But they both seem a damn way off! I'm not going on like this for ever, you know, and don't you think it! Talk about the walrus!"

Mr. Bloggs looked at her severely.

"Bella," he said, "you can cut out of it the moment you want to——"

"Yes, and where'll I cut out to?" she interrupted.

"Exactly! So don't talk nonsense, my girl. What we need is co-operation, and without that we don't get anywhere."

"What we need is a little bit of sparkle!" she snapped. "You and your co-operation! If you want me to co-operate by looking like the man in the moon after a thick night,

I'm not *your* little bit of fluff! Oh, all right, all right," she added quickly, "don't start swearing! But all I want to know is, how much longer is this going *on*?"

He pushed his cup across to her, and she refilled it. Then he said:

"Bella, don't let's quarrel. You know what we really need as much as I do! A bit more in our pocket than we've got—then we'll have the fun all right, don't worry."

"Yes, but I thought you was made of it," she grumbled. "You made me think you was when we first chummed up. You know I've got other chances. Had 'em, anyway. But I've given them up for old Papa you, who was going to take me to the South of France and goodness knows what else! But instead—what? Off you go to London the first day, telling me to wait, after first letting me think I was going with you, and you come back as glum as fog and we haven't budged since! I'm getting sick of this view. What I want's blue seas, and a spot of that—what do you call it?—roulette." She pouted. "That's how to fill your pockets, isn't it? A good old gamble!"

Mr. Bloggs looked at her lugubriously.

"It's also a way to empty your pockets," he remarked. "Would you like to know something?"

"I'll tell you when I've heard!"

"Well, listen. Two weeks ago I had a couple of thousands in my pockets. Now they're in somebody else's pockets. It wasn't roulette. It was horses. With a bit of luck I'd have turned 'em into twenty thousand. Gambling works both ways."

Bella regarded him shrewdly.

"Fact?" she asked. "You had two thousand?"

"Fact," he answered. "So now I've got to wait for some more."

"Two thousand!" she murmured. "You'd better let me keep it for you next time!" She paused, then suddenly

added, "Well—you got a bit more in London, didn't you? From Wac?"

"Bah! That was only a first instalment, and half of that went to your brother."

"Yes, and how much went to me?"

"You'll get your share of the next instalment, Bella, and that'll be bigger—and that's what we're waiting for and why we're sticking *here*. Hell, do you think I'm any fonder of the view than you are? You're the only good thing here to look at, and even you aren't any good when you're cross!" He threw up his hands in sudden despair. "I'm worried, Bella, I'm worried! Can't you see it? You're no damn help at all when you grumble!"

She dipped a piece of hard toast in her coffee and ate it thoughtfully.

"P'r'aps I could help you more if you told me more," she said. "What happened to that little tyke who was watching the window the other day?"

Mr. Bloggs looked startled. Her eyes bored his ruthlessly.

"What happened to him?" she repeated. "I've not seen him since."

"Why—why should you?" he countered.

"There you go again—putting me off! Where's your co-operation? Was he after you?"

"Don't talk nonsense!"

"I'm wondering if it is nonsense? I've mentioned him before, but you always sheer off. How did you get hold of that two thousand pounds?" All at once, as he strove to find a reply, she gave a hard laugh. "You know, it's a funny thing, but you don't seem to know anything about me even yet! All I care about is not getting into trouble, otherwise I'm not particular." She glanced at him wickedly. "Well, you ought to know *that*! So if what's biting you is anything to do with him—I mean, if his health's not quite as good as it was—I should worry! Well, am I the clever girl?"

Mr. Bloggs gulped, then drained his cup.

"There's such a thing as being too clever," he retorted.

"'Nuff said—for the moment! Only we can't stay in this funk-hole for ever, you know."

"We're not going to. We're off the moment your brother brings me the news I'm waiting for. I suppose—I suppose we can count on him?"

"For knowing which side his bread's buttered? Like glue, you can! And the same with me, old darling! You be good to me, and I'll be good to you. I'm only waiting for the start."

Two minutes later, the subject of their discussion walked in.

If Mr. Bloggs and Bella were worried, they were no more worried than Charlie Green appeared to be. His forehead was damp and his cheeks were an unhealthy pallor, and his ferret-eyes were alive with a disturbed and shifting light. He stood hesitating in the doorway, then quickly entered and closed the door.

"Talk of the devil!" muttered Bella. "What's the matter with you?"

The shifting eyes shifted towards Mr. Bloggs.

"Got a drop of something?" asked their owner.

Mr. Bloggs's hand moved towards his hip pocket, then came away again.

"No," he answered.

"Try again?" suggested Charlie, his lip curling.

"Oh, well, perhaps there may be a drop left, after all," murmured Mr. Bloggs.

He produced the flask, and there was more than a drop left. But none was left when Charlie Green had finished with it. While he sat down, Mr. Bloggs replaced the flask in his hip pocket disgusted.

"Well, what's the trouble?" he barked.

"Yes, spit it out," added Bella. "We're just longing for a bit of real depression!"

Charlie regarded her balefully, then lifted an eyebrow at Mr. Bloggs. This did not escape Bella's notice.

"Now get this, you two!" she said. "We're all in this together, or if not I walk out!"

Mr. Bloggs nodded.

"She's right," he acquiesced, glassily. "Bella's a good little girl. If we're going to be hung, she wants to be hung with us!"

The joke did not go down.

"'Anging? 'Oo's talking of 'anging!" exclaimed Charlie. And Bella said, "All Papa's jokes aren't so funny!"

"Don't call me Papa!" exclaimed Mr. Bloggs. "That's not funny, either! Get to it, Charlie—let's have your news, whatever it is!"

Charlie drew out a handkerchief and blew his nose. It didn't need blowing, but he wanted a little more time to decide exactly what he was going to say. And also what he wasn't.

"Well—it ain't bad, really—no, course not—so long as we work it proper," he began.

"Did you find any will?" demanded Mr. Bloggs, impatiently. "That's what you've been paid for!"

"No. But I was interrupted while lookin', and that's what I want to tell you about."

"No one's stopping you."

"It was the old man. 'E must 'ave 'eard something, for 'e come dahn arter me. I got out again all right, but 'e went a cropper on the stairs, and today 'e's in bed all doddery. Mind gorn funny. Daft——"

"What's that?"

"Daft! And 'oo's to say 'e 'asn't been all along, and this new bump 'as jest increased it? That chap's dippy all right! 'E thinks 'e's comin' over with William the Conk! I'm fetchin' the doctor to 'im now."

"Well, that's certainly interesting," agreed Mr. Bloggs,

his mind moving swiftly. "Yes, it certainly is! But—is that the lot?"

Charlie hesitated, then cursed himself for the hesitation. He was never very bright, and at the moment he was far from his brightest. Mr. Bloggs and Bella both marked the hesitation.

"Well—there might be something else," answered Charlie under the pressure of their eyes.

"What do you mean, might be?" snapped Mr. Bloggs. "There either is or there isn't! Out with it!"

"I believe in dealing with one thing at a time."

"Or do you mean when I'm out of the room?" asked Bella.

"There's too many in this job," muttered Charlie.

"Oh! Anybody besides us?" demanded Mr. Bloggs.

"I've 'ad to pay Syd and 'Arry to keep their eyes shut, *you* know that!"

"Well, aren't they doing it?"

"Yep."

"Then why worry about them?"

"I won't, if they go on keeping 'em shut. It may cost another quid or two."

"May it! Well, one of your jobs is to keep expenses down! Did they know about you and last night?"

"A lodge is a small place. They smelt a rat. If they hadn't, the old man's accident would 'ave put 'em-on to something——"

"Yes, but why should they connect that with you?"

Charlie swore.

"What are you gettin' at? They're sharp lads, both of 'em, and would I toss coins at 'em for nothing? Besides, what I said, a lodge is a small place, and when there's three sleeping in it you can't keep secrets!"

"All right, all right!" frowned Mr. Bloggs. "They've smelt a rat. O.K. But did they smell what kind of a rat?"

"Of course not," answered Charlie. "I don't talk, awake or asleep."

"Right, then let's get back to it," said Mr. Bloggs. "What would Syd and Harry have heard, if you had talked in your sleep last night, besides your unsuccessful search for a will? You've got something else to tell us, Charlie, and we're going to know what it is before you leave this room!"

So then Charlie told them. And the eyes of Mr. Edward P. Bloggs and of Miss Bella Brown grew bigger and bigger while he did so.





CHAPTER XIX

URSULA

MEANWHILE, with one place empty, breakfast was taking place in the kitchen at Cresswell Hall.

"They're a long time, fetchin' that doctor," remarked Jane, between two big gulps of tea. Jane despised sips, believing in the larger technique. "I wonder what's keeping 'em?"

"How far is it?" Jerry asked Lucy.

"About four miles, so Lady Cresswell said," she answered.

"Well, that's eight, there and back, and a horse doesn't go as fast as a car."

"How fast does a horse go?" enquired Fingleton.

"Sure, that would depend upon the horse," replied O'Hara, glancing at the clock. "'Tis only half-past eight, and we don't keep a racin' stable." He turned to Lucy, who had just come down. "How is Sir Walter?"

"Quite quiet at the moment," she said. "I wanted to sit with him, but Lady Cresswell insists."

"Not still babblin', then?"

"No. I expect that will pass."

"I hope so. 'Tis a shame—but I'm as sorry for his lady as I am for him. 'Tis a fine woman, that, and I'm wonderin' whether we shall go on breedin' her kind. And there's another thing I'm wonderin'. Who's this Ursula he keeps on talkin' about?"

"Have *you* ever heard of her?" Smith asked Jane, coming out of a mouthful of porridge.

Jane shook her head.

"Mightn't be anybody," went on Smith. "In 1917 I went up with a bomb, and when I come down I was talking

about a Kate. They say I went on talking about her for a week, but I never found out who she was."

"I expect you knew before you went up with the bomb!" laughed Jerry.

But Smith denied it. "That was what I was hoping," he answered, "but she never come along. I waited for weeks and weeks—but she never come along."

Depressed at his memory of the unsatisfactory romance, he returned for consolation to his porridge.

Jerry reverted to the subject of the nocturnal disturbance.

"I wonder what those sounds were," he said. "Bit worrying! I don't suppose *they* were imagination?"

"Jane and I heard them, too," Lucy pointed out.

"Yes, but what you heard may have been Sir Walter moving about. Nothing found missing, eh?"

"Not yet."

"Ah, that's the point! Not yet! I suppose, as steward, I ought to have a look around. Not that it would be conclusive without an inventory. Still, if anything obvious is gone I ought to miss it. Clocks, statues, and so forth." He pushed his chair back. "I'll have a scout round now."

"Will ye look in the top drawer of the chest in me bedroom," O'Hara called after him as he left the room, "and if ye don't see a new packet of razor blades, send for the police."

Jerry was gone for twenty minutes, and when he returned he had nothing to report. Breakfast was now over, and Lucy was preparing to take up Lady Cresswell's tray. Jerry regarded her frowning.

"That's usually Madeleine's job, isn't it?" he said.

"Yes, but she's not back yet," replied Lucy, "so I'm taking it up instead."

"H'm. They've been gone for nearly an hour and a half now, haven't they?"

"About that."

"I hope nothing's happened. I shouldn't have let her go—I ought to have gone myself. But she did insist, didn't she? Not, of course, that anything could have happened. Shall I carry the tray up for you?"

"Thank you. She's having it in Sir Walter's room. If you'd carry it as far as the door I'd be grateful."

On their way upstairs Jerry said:

"You might tell Lady Cresswell that I've been round the place and everything looks as usual, but of course there's one room I couldn't explore. The locked one. Queer about that. Have you any theory?"

"None at all," Lucy answered.

"Nor have I. But if there's anything of special value in it someone ought to go in and have a look. Would you suggest it to Lady Cresswell?"

"Yes, I will. It's a good idea."

"One of my rare ones! You know, Lucy, I don't really think I make much of a steward. You're a much better housekeeper. Somehow, I can't seem to get my teeth in it. I spend most of my time trying to find things to do!"

"We'd miss you if you weren't here, Jerry. Everybody would."

"Thanks for the comfort. Well, here we are. I'll hang about for a bit near by, in case I'm wanted."

She knocked on the door and took the tray from him. He watched her go into the room unhappily. He was feeling restless and worried, and calling himself a fool for his anxiety.

Lady Cresswell greeted Lucy with a smile.

"He's not moved," she said. "He's sleeping quietly. The best thing for him. Did they go for the doctor?"

"Yes, but they're not back yet," answered Lucy.

"No? They are a long time. Yes, put the tray on this little table. I'll have it here. And you can stay here, if you will, and talk to me. How pretty those flowers are."

"Mr. Fingleton picked them for you especially."

"Did he? That was nice and thoughtful of him. Draw up a chair. Really, you're more like a family than a domestic staff. Is everything all right downstairs?"

"Yes, my lady," replied Lucy, as she sat down. "Mr. Haines has been all over the house, and he can't find anything wrong."

"Wrong?" repeated Lady Cresswell.

"He thought—he wanted to be sure that no one had broken into the house last night."

"Oh, yes, of course. Those noises. Well, perhaps there weren't any." She glanced towards the bed. "When we get old, we hear all sorts of things that other people do not. For years I've had a faint ringing sound in my ears—but you can't hear that, can you?"

"I'm sorry—it must be trying."

"Oh, no, not at all. Well, yes, perhaps it was at first. But you get used to anything, and now I should quite miss it! It's rather pretty. Mr. Haines found everything all right, you say?"

"Yes, but he sent you a message."

"And what was that?"

"There was one room he couldn't go into—the one you keep locked—and he thought perhaps you would like to make sure that nothing was missing from there."

Lady Cresswell was silent for a little while. She nibbled a piece of toast, and then dipped it in her cup.

"Dear me! You are finding out my secret vice!" she remarked. "When I was a girl we were never allowed to dip, it was regarded as shocking manners, but I always wanted to, and now, sometimes, I do!" After another little silence, she said, "Yes—the room—perhaps I'd—" And then, suddenly following a new thought, she went on, "I suppose Sir Walter—did he say anything to make you think—but, no, that's not very likely."

Lucy waited. Lady Cresswell dipped her toast again, caught herself doing it, frowned, and smiled.

"You must forgive me if I seem a little disjointed this morning," she apologised. "There is nothing more irritating I think than half-finished sentences. I remember my father used to say, 'Never speak until your thought is complete.' Another variation was, 'Never speak with a full mouth or an empty mind.' I remember that always impressed me as very clever. . . . Perhaps it was. What I was going to say was—did Sir Walter say anything to make you think *he* had gone to the locked room?"

"No, my lady," answered Lucy.

"And what you heard—where you found him—anything at all that happened—did not lead to that impression?"

"No, my lady. Though I do remember, as we were helping him back to his room, he glanced in the direction of that room when we got to the top of the staircase."

"Did he? Yes—well. And he mentioned the name of Ursula? It began then, I think you told me? Before he woke up this morning?"

"Yes."

Now Lady Cresswell raised her eyes and looked at Lucy with a new directness.

"You have never asked me to explain that."

"It wasn't my place," replied Lucy.

"No. But I expect you were curious?"

"We wondered a little, naturally."

"We?"

"Jane was with me."

"Oh, yes, of course. . . . It is a thing we never speak of. We have not spoken of it for years—that is, I mean, to others. But I think I would like to tell you now. Indeed, perhaps I should. Ursula, my dear, was our daughter. We only had two children, and both are dead now. Our son

died last year. Ursula died thirty years ago. I don't think we ever quite got over it."

"I'm sorry, my lady," murmured Lucy, feeling strangely moved.

"Yes, it was very sad. Death is not a tragedy when it comes to old people. Their world has gone. They are no longer needed. Just useless folk, living in their exaggerated memories—till sometimes they hardly know what is real and what is not. Then, one day, the curtain comes down, and all is smoothed out again. But when young people die, it is different. . . . I often wonder what war-mongers think they are doing when they slaughter youth and vigour for their ideals, leaving war-weakened children and bewildered veterans—and the wounded—to straighten out the future! Dear me, am I becoming political? How modern! Women were not supposed to worry about such things in my young days!" She smiled, then grew serious again. "Ursula was twenty-one when she died. Just. We enjoyed her here for twenty years. She loved this place, you know, and the garden, and the lake. We—we often see her here still." Her lined eyes moved swiftly to Lucy's, then swiftly away again. "She used to say she would never leave it—or that, if she did, she would always come back. . . . Is this boring you?"

"Oh, please!"

"Thank you. Only it seems strange to be talking like this to anyone else after all these years. I did not think it would happen. Other people have their own interests—we should not intrude ours—nor, ordinarily, have any desire to. Well—that is just what happened. Ursula did go away, and she did come back. She went away in the old-fashioned romantic manner—out of her bedroom window, to be married. Imagine any modern girl having to do that! And her husband deserted her after a few months, and she wrote and asked whether we would receive her back. Her father—that is, we—had

vowed that we would never have her back. The elopement—the marriage—had shocked us terribly. You see, we were right in our estimate of the young man, though not perhaps in our handling of the situation. I dare say today you think Sir Walter and myself amusing. I dare say I should myself, in your place. But what is now a—game?—was once quite real, and we were very severe and determined, I assure you! We believed in our times, yes, and in the tradition that had produced our times.” She gazed at the opposite wall thoughtfully. “We knew the past had been different, but we did not want the future to be different. We wanted it to be a continuation of what we knew and believed in—we wanted Cresswell Hall, and the contented, well-ordered life in it, to go on for ever. I see now, of course, that that was impossible. Very foolish. We should have allowed Ursula her escape, not through a window, but through the front door. Then, perhaps, she *would* have come back.”

“But—you said——? Didn’t you let her return, then?” asked Lucy.

“Oh, yes, I haven’t finished,” answered Lady Cresswell. “Of course we wrote and told her to return. We knew—both of us—that this was the only thing we truly wanted in *all* the world! You never knew Ursula, so of course cannot understand our feelings—though even if you had known her, you would not understand them. No one ever really completely understands anybody else’s feelings. Is not that so? Probably even Sir Walter and I do not completely understand each other’s feelings, though we seem to, and are alike in so many ways. I am talking too much. Well, never mind, it does not often happen. Where was I?”

“You wrote to Ursula, and asked her to come back,” said Lucy.

“Yes,” nodded Lady Cresswell, “that is what we wrote to her. She was in Italy. We sent her money, for she had none. She was to be home on her twenty-first birthday, and

—and the excitement of it, and the wonder of it, were almost unbearable! She was as excited as we were. In one letter she wrote, in reply to ours—I still have it—this is one thing she said in it. ‘Mother,’ she wrote, ‘we never know what we have had till we have lost it.’ And she was not thinking of her husband when she wrote that. She was thinking of Cresswell Hall—this place, where you and I are now sitting. She was returning to what she had lost, and would soon be walking again along the lavender path, and by the lake, and in the rose garden, and riding her horse, and having tea with us in the drawing-room, and—all the rest of it. Yes, she had lost Cresswell Hall, and we had lost her, but we were all to have back what we had lost.”

She glanced towards the bed. Sir Walter was sleeping peacefully. She smiled at him with suspiciously bright eyes.

“You would have thought he was a boy again,” she went on. “I think he felt like one. We prepared her room, and had it redecorated, though just in the style she had always known. We laid out presents on her bed. Mine—one of mine—was a new dress. A very lovely new dress. Sir Walter was more extravagant. On the day before she was expected he felt we had not done enough for her, and he made a—most expensive purchase. He came home very excited about it, and at first he kept it a secret even from me, locking it in a drawer. But then he decided to show it to me—late at night—and he went down to fetch it. You’ll think this rather odd, perhaps, but he tripped on the stairs and had a fall. No, not a bad one—but—do you think?—sufficient to make him believe history was repeating itself—or perhaps that he had gone back in history—when a similar accident occurred exactly thirty years later?”

Lucy stared at her.


“Do you mean——?” she began.

“Well, I shall mention it to Dr. Orvil,” she replied, “to see what he thinks of it. Though of course last night he went

downstairs, as we know, for a different reason. But that is by the way. I must end my story. Next morning—the day she was to return—he was better, and filled a vase on Ursula's dressing-table with flowers. A tall silver vase—another of our presents. And then we waited. And in the early afternoon a boy came with a telegram. . . . It was a train accident."

Lucy could think of nothing to say. There was indeed nothing she could say. After a little pause, Lady Cresswell gave the breakfast tray a little push, to imply she had finished. Then she said, with an odd little smile:

"But she came back. Yes. And this time to stay. Shall we go now and look in her room?"





CHAPTER XX

THE LOCKED ROOM

JERRY was hovering in the corridor when they came out of Sir Walter's bedroom. He had twice been down to the kitchen to find out whether Madeleine had returned, and was on the point of making a third descent. He did not understand why he was so worried, and had given up trying to explain it.

"How is Sir Walter?" he asked nervily, as Lady Cresswell and Lucy approached him. "I don't suppose there is anything I can do?"

"Well, yes, there is," answered Lady Cresswell, and the news was good, for he longed to end his aimlessness. "You can go and sit in Sir Walter's room, if you will. He's asleep, but if he wakes I would like you to let me know. Do you mind?"

"Of course not! Where will I find you?"

Lady Cresswell paused for a moment to consider her reply. Then she said:

"I am going to take your advice, Mr. Haines, and see if everything is all right in the room you were not able to go in yourself. Thank you for the suggestion." All at once she regarded him a little harder. "Is anything the matter?"

"I beg your pardon? No, I don't think so."

"You look worried, Mr. Haines. I should rather like a more convincing reply."

He coloured slightly.

"I—I was just thinking that the doctor ought to be here by now," he stammered.

"He will be here shortly," said Lady Cresswell. "Dr. Orvil is a very good friend, and I know he will not keep

us waiting any longer than necessary. I suppose Green is back?"

"Not yet."

"No?" She looked vaguely surprised. "Oh, well, perhaps they have waited to bring him along."

Then they continued on their way along the corridor and past the head of the main staircase, while Jerry entered Sir Walter's room, calling himself a fool. Of course, that was what had happened. They were waiting to bring the doctor back, and probably he had kept them while he snatched a quick breakfast. After all, doctors had to eat! Why hadn't he thought of that himself?

Lucy Clover felt a little flutter at her heart as Lady Cresswell paused outside the locked door and groped in her pocket for the key. She had been greatly affected by the story she had heard, and but for the belief that Lady Cresswell had found it a relief to talk she would have felt herself an intruder on some sacred family privacy. Lady Cresswell did hesitate for a moment before inserting the key, as though assailed by a sudden doubt. It was only for a moment. She turned the key and opened the door, and Lucy found herself looking into a room which for years had only been seen by the eyes of Ursula's parents.

If the story had affected her, the room affected her more, for it brought the story almost suffocatingly close. Thirty years evaporated. The room might have been waiting for Ursula's return that very day. There on the bed was the dress she was to have received and worn, a lovely thing of soft blue silk, and though it had been bought so long ago, still displaying its newness. Beside it on the spotless bedspread were a pair of long white gloves and a straw picture hat. Also on the bed were a number of neatly-arranged little boxes, each containing an intended gift. On the carpet beneath the dress was a pair of blue shoes. The tall silver vase was on a small table by the window, filled with yellow

roses. Beside it was a photograph in a silver frame. There was no dust on the surface of the table. There was no dust anywhere.

Lucy never knew how long she stood staring into the room. Time was a jumble, and it might have been seconds or minutes. But suddenly she became conscious of her companion's stillness, and turned to her. Lady Cresswell's eyes were fixed on the bed, and there was an odd, disturbing expression in them.

"Is—anything wrong?" asked Lucy.

"Yes," answered the old lady, quietly.

She moved back into the corridor, and Lucy moved back with her. Then Lady Cresswell closed and relocked the door.

There was a sound on the stairs, and they turned to see Smith approaching.

"The carriage is back, my lady," said Smith. His voice sounded troubled. "The doctor will be along in a few minutes. He's following."

"Thank you," replied Lady Cresswell. "Yes? I think you have something more to say?"

"Er—no, my lady," stammered Smith.

"Please!"

"Well—perhaps I might mention it. Green came back alone."

Lady Cresswell looked at him sharply.

"Alone? Do you mean Madeleine was not with him?"

"No, my lady."

"Why not?"

"Green said she got out before they reached the doctor's house. Said she felt faint or something—I couldn't quite make out——"

"Send Green to me," interrupted Lady Cresswell. "I'll see him in the drawing-room."

"Very good, my lady," answered Smith, and departed.

Lady Cresswell gazed after him, and then turned back to Lucy. Her expression was troubled.

"Very odd," she commented. "Did Madeleine mention anything about feeling unwell to you?"

"No," replied Lucy.

"Did she seem all right when she went?"

"Yes, my lady."

"H'm. Very odd indeed. If she felt unwell she should not have gone. Why did she go?"

"She asked if she could. Mr. Haines had been going, but she seemed to want to, and so——"

Her voice trailed off. She felt disturbed and puzzled, and had a wretched sensation of foreboding.

"Well, we'll see what Green has to say," said Lady Cresswell. "Please come with me."

Charlie seemed disturbed himself when they received him in the drawing-room. He had his cap in his hand, and he fiddled with it while answering questions.

"Tell me exactly what happened," said Lady Cresswell. "I understand Madeleine is not back yet?"

"No, my lady," answered Charlie.

"Well? Go on!"

"A bit before we reached the doctor's 'ouse she asked me to stop, and got out. She said she'd got a 'eadache."

"Why should that make her get out?"

"I dunno, my lady."

"What else did she say?"

"That was the lot. She'd got a 'eadache."

"Nonsense!" retorted Lady Cresswell, impatiently. "There must have been something else! Didn't she say what she was going to do? I don't suppose she just got out, and you left her in the road without knowing what she was going to do?"

"Oh! I see. Well, yes, o' course. I asked 'er that."

"And what did she say?"

"She said not to worry, and she'd be all right after she'd walked a bit."

"Walked where?"

"Eh?"

"Come, come!" exclaimed Lady Cresswell, her impatience growing. "You must have made some arrangement! Was she going to follow you to the doctor's, or walk back? If she was not well, it would have been quite reprehensible of you to have left her just like that! She was in a carriage on the way to a doctor's house, the best place for her if she felt ill!"

Charlie replied eagerly.

"Well, there you are! That's jest what I told 'er. 'You stay in 'ere,' I said, 'and the doctor can 'ave a look at yer!' But, no, out she gets, and nothing I can do will stop 'er!"

"Very odd!"

"That's what I thought! 'Rum!' I thought. See, she looked all right."

"Oh! She looked all right?"

"As well as me."

"And she had not complained before?"

"No, my lady."

"Did you arrange to pick her up again?"

"Eh?"

"Are you deaf, my man? What was she doing when you left her? Just standing, or following you, or coming back?"

"Oh, I see! What was she doing? She was jest standin'."

"Perhaps she meant to wait there for you?"

"That's right! I was to pick 'er up on the way back. But she wasn't there when I come back. 'She's walked on,' I thought. But I never come upon 'er, so I thought it was a bit funny."

"What made you so long?"

"Eh?"

"Must I repeat everything?" snapped Lady Cresswell. "And for goodness' sake stop twiddling with your cap!"

"I'm sorry, my lady," mumbled Charlie, "but this 'as got me fair worried, and that's a fact! Fair worried! Why was I so long? Well—don't yer see—I loitered a bit, lookin' for 'er. She might 'ave fell into a ditch or something. I kep' me eyes open and 'ad a look round."

"Well, if she's not back in a few minutes, have another look round," responded the old lady crisply. "Have you had your breakfast?"

"Not yet, no. See, as soon as I got your message——"

"Have it now quickly, and then if she has not returned go out again and make a thorough search. That will be all for the present."

Gladly accepting his dismissal, Charlie descended to the kitchen, still twiddling his cap. The basement passages had a Victorian dimness, and he nearly walked into O'Hara in the doorway. He jumped as though he had come up against an electric current. O'Hara regarded him sourly.

"Is it anticipatin' ye are?" he remarked. "Ye're not meetin' the devil yet."

Even this blatant wit was too subtle for Charlie's mood. He blinked, stooped to regain the tortured cap that had escaped to the floor in the collision, and stammered:

"'As that girl come back yet?"

"She has not," answered O'Hara, "and if any harm's come to her she won't be the only one in trouble!"

"Oh! What's that mean?"

"Work it out, Charlie boy."

Charlie scowled.

"Am I 'er father?" he demanded.

"It would surprise me," replied O'Hara, "but one does not have to be a parent to look after a girl."

"Now, you listen to me," retorted Charlie, suddenly fighting back, "that girl's very well able to look arter 'erself!

Everybody's blamin' me, but get this! If she'd seemed as bad as she said she was, I'd 'ave kep' 'er in the carriage! 'Eadache! Tell that to the marines!"

"I don't quite follow you?"

"No, but p'r'aps you will afore the day's out! No good askin' me what 'er game was, but I'll bet—as she ain't come back—she's got one on! Yes, and p'r'aps it begun when she offered to come along with me! Next time I'm sent anywhere with a message I'll bar company!"

Upstairs in the drawing-room, Lady Cresswell was asking Lucy what she thought of the new lodge-keeper.

"If you want my honest opinion," answered Lucy, "I'm afraid I don't think very much of him."

"Your honest opinion agrees with mine," nodded Lady Cresswell, "but we must not allow ourselves to be prejudiced by his rather unfortunate manner. I hope—I hope very much—that Madeleine will soon be back. I haven't told you, have I, what was wrong in my daughter's room?"

"No, my lady."

"Something was missing. That special present my husband bought for her, and that has always been on the bed by the dress. A pearl necklace."

The troubled silence that followed this information was broken by a sound in the drive. Lucy hastened to the window. But it was not Madeleine. It was the doctor.





CHAPTER XXI

ABOVE STAIRS AND BELOW

THE SPIRIT of Ursula Cresswell, serene in death, may have been slightly disturbed that morning as it lingered invisibly about the Hall or wandered through the lavender paths to the water-lilied lake. But unlike the troubled material forms around it—unlike its own material form exactly thirty years before—Ursula's spirit knew that all trouble is transitory, being no more than the ruffling of a surface by a momentary breeze.

Rather oddly, it was not the condition of Sir Walter that cast the heaviest shadow over the place. Sir Walter had received a shaking and something had gone wrong with the works of his time-machine, but Dr. Orvil's report, after a careful and discreet examination, was satisfactory, and the doctor expressed his conviction that the old baronet's calendar would soon readjust itself, and that the only necessity meanwhile was rest. Sir Walter had obligingly drifted into consciousness during the doctor's visit, and had closed his eyes again immediately afterwards.

Just before leaving, Dr. Orvil regarded Lady Cresswell rather hard, and said:

"And, now, what about *you*?"

"Me?" replied Lady Cresswell, rather as though she had never heard of such a person.

"Yes. How are *you* standing all this?"

Lady Cresswell smiled.

"Your experienced eye should tell you that, Henry. Do I look as though I were about to faint?"

The doctor, who in Cresswell Hall was more than a doctor, blinked at his old friend solemnly through his gold-rimmed

glasses. One of the most comfortable things about him, in the view of Sir Walter and Lady Cresswell, was that he had never succumbed to horn.

"No, my dear Cynthia, you do not look as though you were going to faint," he admitted, "but then you never do." He hesitated before adding, "I recall, you did not thirty years ago today."

"So you remember the date?"

"I always remember it. And that is another reason why I should like to be quite certain before I go that there is nothing I can prescribe for you. People of your kind—people who never howl until after they are dead—a doctor gets no help from them at all!"

"I don't need any of your nasty medicine, Henry, thank you," she answered, "and I sincerely hope I shall not howl after I am dead! It would be most uncomfortable for others."

Dr. Orvil laughed. He was a bachelor, but only, he sometimes reflected, because he had never met anyone in his youth like Cynthia Cresswell.

"Then there is nothing more I can do for you?"

"No." But suddenly Lady Cresswell recanted. "Yes, just one small thing. After my man had been to your house with my message, did a maid call?"

"A maid? No! Did you send a maid, too?"

"There was a little confusion. You saw nothing of the maid, then? It would be the parlourmaid—I think she has opened the door to you. A pretty dark-haired girl. You've seen nothing of her? At your house—or on the road?"

The doctor shook his head, and waited vaguely for some further explanation which did not come. Unless for medical reasons, he was not one to press a point.

"Well, if you need me again today," he said, making a move, "give me a ring. No, my mistake! I should say, send me a note by the Royal Derbyshire coach, and I'll come along. I'll look in again this evening, anyway."

It was a relief to know that Sir Walter was in no danger, but after the doctor's departure other troubles remained, and Madeleine was merely one of them. The other was the wonderful string of pearls that should have been on Ursula's bed beside the lovely blue dress.

The morning dragged on, and Madeleine did not return. Charlie, after his delayed breakfast, went out unwillingly on a further search, and Jerry, while the rest of the staff proceeded gloomily with their normal business, made a tour on his own. Returning unsuccessfully, he sought Lady Cresswell. He knew nothing as yet of the missing necklace, or of Ursula. For the moment Lady Cresswell had asked Lucy to keep these matters to herself.

Lady Cresswell received him in her throne-like chair. The second throne was pathetically empty, and although she did not look in the least like Queen Victoria, Jerry could not help thinking of the Queen without her consort.

"Lady Cresswell, I'm terribly worried about Madeleine," he exclaimed, plunging right in. "Green isn't back yet, but somehow I don't believe he's going to bring us any news, and I've had a bit of a search myself. Shouldn't we—shouldn't we do something else about it?"

"What else?" asked Lady Cresswell, quietly.

"Well, if she's away much longer, shouldn't we notify the police?"

Lady Cresswell looked thoughtful.

"I've wondered about that, Mr. Haines. But do you think the police would be interested—with no more than you could tell them?"

"Why not?" he answered. "Suppose Madeleine has had an accident?"

"Do you think she has?"

"I don't know what I think, but Green said she was ill."

Lady Cresswell did not reply for a few moments. Then she said:

"I have not had much experience in my life of the police, but my belief is that, while they are always willing to help, they are very chary of being sent on a wild goose chase. Servants have been known to walk out of a place. Suppose they suggest that? What would you say?"

Jerry frowned. Such an idea, of course, was unthinkable, but he was sane enough to realise that the police might not consider it so.

"Servants would only do that if they were dissatisfied with the place," he argued. "Madeleine was not. She's been happy here—as we all have."

"Thank you. Just the same, there might be other reasons."

"I can't think of one. Not one that would apply to Madeleine, anyhow. Besides," he went on, "she hasn't taken any of her things away with her—they're all still in her room. You'd only do a sudden bunk like that if—well, if you'd done something wrong—stolen something, say, and needed to clear out while the going was good."

"Mr. Haines," said Lady Cresswell. He looked at her sharply, chilled by her tone. "You remember that, at your suggestion, I went into that locked room? Before the doctor came?"

"Yes."

"It was a good suggestion. You see, something *was* missing from that room. A very valuable pearl necklace. Well? Do you still advise me to send for the police?"

Jerry's mouth opened, but he made no response. Life had suddenly become insane. Lady Cresswell went on:

"Personally I cannot bear the idea of sending for the police. The very notion of seeing them about the place makes me shudder! The only time I ever had anything to do with a policeman was when I got lost in Regent's Park as a little girl, and one found me and took me home. But—of course—if we cannot clear up our mystery ourselves—I should say,

our two mysteries—then I suppose I shall have to do something about it. That's quite clear, isn't it?"

"Yes—of course," murmured Jerry.

"So what I propose is this," said Lady Cresswell, with a note of finality in her voice. "I have searched the room thoroughly, and you have searched the house, and it seems we can do no good by continuing the search. I shall not make any further move, however, until you have told all the staff of—of the position. Perhaps you will be able to get something out of them, and——" She paused, considering. "Yes, you can mention, if you like, that today I think my mood would be found charitable. Yes, you can mention that. I am not sure whether it is strictly right, but it may be helpful." Jerry nodded, to convey that he accepted the implication. "I hope Madeleine is back by now. Only do not wait for her, please. And if you find out nothing, and if she is still absent—well, then, Mr. Haines, we will *have* to take further steps, won't we? Perhaps for Madeleine's sake, as well as our own?" She gave a small sigh. "I think I am a little tired."

Suddenly Jerry forgot his own anxieties, and remembered hers. The sigh revived his consciousness that he was in the presence of an old lady of nearly eighty.

"You must be," he answered sympathetically. "I won't keep you any longer—I'll get on with things at once."

The conference below stairs did not prove encouraging. Charlie had now returned, and he was in an ugly mood. The moment Jerry mentioned the missing necklace he cracked his fingers and laughed. "See me goin' out any more arter that baggage!" he jeered. "What did I tell yer? 'Eadache my foot! It was 'er get-away!"

"Have you ever had your nose punched, Mr. Green?" enquired O'Hara.

"I've punched the noses o' them that's tried!" retorted Charlie. "But, of course, you would stick up for 'er—she's

one o' your bunch!" He turned to the under-gardeners; Jerry had summoned a full meeting. "What do *you* think about it? You two saw us go out. Did that girl look any more ill than you or me? As if she needed a 'olderday?"

Syd and Harry exchanged uneasy glances.

"Well—not for 'er 'ealth," said Syd.

"Seemed all right, as far as I could see," agreed Harry.

"There you are!" exclaimed Charlie, triumphantly. "Plain as a pikestaff! That bitch is a wrong 'un!"

Fingleton cleared his throat hurriedly as O'Hara and Jerry both clenched their fists.

"Er—you do not seem to be aware, Mr. Green," he said, "that there is such a thing as slander."

"Bah! Come off the legal stuff!" answered Charlie. "I'll say it again. She's a wrong 'un! And now somebody 'it me! Yus, and 'ow'll *that* be for assault?"

Jerry walked up to him white with anger.

"I think you'd better get out," he said.

"Oh, I'm getting out!" responded Charlie, backing. He had asked for trouble; nobody could have asked for it more plainly; but he was not anxious to meet it when he saw it coming. "I'm getting out," he repeated loudly, "right now! This is my notice, see? I'm not staying here to be bawled at when all I'm doing is to talk sense! You can get somebody else for my job, Mr. 'Aines! I'm finished with it!"

He turned on his heel and vanished. The two under-gardeners after a moment's hesitation, vanished after him.

"Should we let 'em go?" queried O'Hara, dubiously.

"I'll interview them later," growled Jerry. "I told Green to go, and I don't think I could trust myself to talk to him any more at the moment. Well, let's get on. What we've got to think about just now is that necklace." O'Hara refrained from mentioning that this was exactly what he had been thinking of. "It's a rotten situation, but we'll have to

face it. We're all suspects, assumedly, until we've cleared it up. So——"

"So what?"

Jerry's pale cheeks took on a little colour as he answered:

"Do any of us know anything about it?"

A silence suggested that nobody did.

"Oh, by the way, I was to let you know," Jerry went on, unhappily, "that if we could find out among ourselves, a lenient view would be taken of the matter."

"No questions asked, eh?" said Smith.

"Well, yes. That's what I gathered."

"And—er—suppose we do not find out among ourselves?" murmured Fingleton.

"Then it'll mean the police. Hell! Before this happened I thought it was time for them, anyway. In fact, that's what I went to see Lady Cresswell about. You see—Madeleine not being back yet——"

His voice trailed off. He looked miserable. The only one who seemed to be suffering no discomfort was Tonsil.

"Lummy!" he muttered. "It's like a book! The one you never drempt of being the one what's done it!"

"Then here's something *you* never drempt of!" exclaimed Jane, and boxed his ears.

"Well done, Jane!" grinned O'Hara, while Tonsil's ears sang with injured astonishment. "Keep that up, and we'll be sendin' ye up to the lodge!" But then he grew serious, and turned to Lucy. "What time was it ye heard those noises and found Sir Walter on the stairs?"

"I couldn't say exactly," replied Lucy. "A little after midnight, I think."

"It was twenty past when I come out and joined you, Mrs. Clover," said Jane. "I know because I was reading, and I'd almost dropped off like one does, and then coming to sudden I said, 'What time is it, it's time you blew the candle out,' and then I looked, and then I heard you in the passage."

"Twenty past," said O'Hara. "Well, that tells us something, because 'tis obvious what you heard, or what Sir Walter heard, was our burglar. Now, can any of us prove we were all tucked up in our beds like good little boys and girls at twenty minutes past twelve?"

Nobody could, although Smith and Tonsil thought they would have heard had the other left the room.

"Of course, Jane and I were out ourselves," mentioned Lucy.

"Yes, but the necklace must have been stolen before that," Jerry pointed out.

Lucy smiled rather grimly. "You have only our words for it that we weren't out before that!"

"Er—what you mean, I take it," amplified Fingleton, without intending to be unkind, "is that you could not swear that Jane wasn't already out of bed when you—so to speak—contacted her, any more than she could swear the same about you?"

"That puts it quite nicely," agreed Lucy.

Tonsil, his ears and his pride still smarting, tried a comeback. He had nothing against Madeleine, but to a mind experienced in detective literature she was the obvious hare, and even at the risk of further unpopularity he plugged his theory.

"Miss Trent wasn't in 'er room," he said. "I 'eard Mrs. Clover say she looked in and she wasn't there."

"She'd gone to the bathroom for a glass of water," replied Lucy, quickly.

"So she *said*," persisted Tonsil, "but 'ow long would that take? Why didn't she bump into one of you when she was coming back from the bathroom? Or 'ear the noises 'erself, if she was up, and then go along with you?"

This was the thought that had worried Lucy, and she had no answer for it. It was Jane who took up the challenge.

"Talking a lot of nonsense, that's what you are!" she

exclaimed, warmly. "I saw her when she was back in bed, anyhow—see, I checked up on the lot of you!"

"When was that, Jane?" asked O'Hara.

"Oh, I can't remember ezackly."

"You remembered twenty past twelve ezackly," remarked Tonsil doggedly.

He'd had his ears boxed! He'd show 'em!

"Try and remember, Jane," said O'Hara.

Deciding that she would murder Tonsil when she got him alone, Jane replied crossly, "It was when I come up to bed again."

"Yus, after *she'd* come up again first!" retorted Tonsil. "I'll bet!"

Something had to be done about Tonsil. O'Hara did it, quietly.

"Tell me, young feller me lad," he said. "Ye've known Miss Trent for quite a long while, and 'tis no detective you'll be unless you're a judge of character. Do you think Miss Trent is a thief now? Is that what you're afther tellin' us?"

Thus directly challenged, Tonsil hedged.

"I never said that," he answered.

"No, but I'm askin' ye whether you say it now?"

"Well—she was out last night——"

"*What?*"

"Leastways," the boy corrected himself hastily, "I think she was."

"You'll be wise to watch that tongue of yours!" exclaimed Jerry, sharply. "We're not interested in what you think!"

But O'Hara disagreed.

"As he has mentioned the thought," he said, "I think we'd better be knowin' the reason for it. But, begorra, if it isn't a good reason, Bob, I'll make ye into soup!"

Tonsil cast his eyes up and appealed to heaven.

"I dunno what's the matter with all of you," he complained, not entirely without justice. "We're s'posed to be talking

about the necklace, and 'oo's took it, but whenever I open my mouth you're all down on me! It was Syd told me she'd been out last night. No, 'Arry. No, Syd. One of 'em, any'ow. They said she was out."

"How did they know?" demanded Jerry.

"Eh? She was seen."

"And how did they see her—if they did—unless they were out themselves?"

Suddenly Jerry dashed to the door.

"Whoa! Where are ye off to?" cried O'Hara.

"For an intelligent man," retorted Jerry, "isn't that rather a superfluous question?"



CHAPTER XXII

SYD AND HARRY

JERRY came upon the under-gardeners in the drive, and their rather furtive attitude suggested that they were expecting an interview.

"I want a few words with you two," he said, getting straight to the attack. "You left the kitchen a bit hurriedly, didn't you?"

"Well, we weren't wanted any more were we?" replied Syd, defensively. "This ain't nothing to do with us."

"I hope not," retorted Jerry, "but until matters have been cleared up it's to do with everybody! We're all suspects—and when I say that I'm not excluding myself."

"Oh," muttered Syd, and rubbed his nose.

"I should've thought, sir, there was some we could suspect more'n others," said Harry, a little hesitatingly.

"Meaning?"

"Do yer want me to say it?"

"I'll say it for you. You mean Miss Trent?"

Harry looked uncomfortable. Adopting the method of O'Hara with Tonsil, Jerry went on:

"Do you two really and truly believe Miss Trent's taken the necklace?"

Syd shot him a shrewd glance.

"Seems to me, sir, I 'eard Mr. Fingleton saying something about slander!"

Jerry smiled, and conceded the point.

"You're one up on that," he replied good-naturedly, and all at once realised that good nature was his best tack. "But you know, Syd, there's ways of saying things, and it was the way Charlie spoke that got our backs up. The way

we're talking needn't worry anybody." Noting a vague suspicion in the under-gardeners' eyes, he wondered whether he were overdoing it. "Yes, and Charlie's bad example started Bob Tonsil off just after you'd gone. By the way, Bob said that Miss Trent had been seen in the grounds late last night."

Syd and Harry looked at each other.

"Did he?" murmured Syd.

"Yes. He told us that he got it from one of you. Is that right?"

"I dunno. Is it?" blinked Harry, with his eyes on Syd.

"Well—yes—I think I did mention it to 'im," admitted Syd.

"Good! We're getting on," said Jerry. "Now, if someone saw her in the grounds late last night, what were *they* doing in the grounds?"

"Eh?"

"Come along, Syd, let's have it. What were *you* doing in the grounds?"

"What, me?" exclaimed Syd, indignantly. "I wasn't in the grounds! I was in bed—and so was 'Arry!"

"That's right," nodded Harry. "We room together."

"Then who saw Miss Trent?" demanded Jerry.

"That was Charlie," answered Syd.

"Oh! Charlie?"

"'Oo else? We——"

He stopped short. Both men looked uneasy.

"Now, listen to me," said Jerry, and his voice was severe. "The whole thing will come out presently, so we might as well have the truth now as later. It'll save the hell of a lot of trouble, and may be best for you two, also."

"Us? I've told you, we've nothing to do with it——" began Syd.

"And I'm not accusing you of anything," interrupted Jerry, "but if we have to get the police in, and if they find you've held any knowledge back, they'll consider you *have*

had something to do with it, so get a little sense into your noddles before that happens! I'm as sure you haven't taken the necklace as I am that Miss Trent hasn't——" he wasn't as sure, but he said it "—but if you know a little more than is healthy for you, well, you didn't hear what I said in the kitchen after you left. Lady Cresswell's ready to forgive and forget if she can have the pearls returned without having to bother a police station."

"Pearls, is it?" exclaimed Syd.

Thus, unconsciously, he cleared himself. The word "pearls" had not been mentioned while the under-gardeners were in the kitchen—only "necklace"—and Syd's surprise was too obvious to have been feigned. Unlike Jerry, he had never been on the stage.

"You didn't suppose it was a necklace out of a Christmas cracker, did you?" replied Jerry.

"Pearls!" repeated Syd. "They'd be worth a bit!"

"If they was real," qualified Harry.

"They were real," Jerry assured them, "so now we'll get on with it. Charlie saw—so you say—Miss Trent in the grounds last night. How do you know that?"

Syd scratched his head. It was Harry who answered.

"We 'eard 'im go out," he said. "We chipped 'im in the mornin' about it."

"Yes? Go on!"

With almost childlike ingenuousness, Harry glanced at Syd with raised eyebrows as though to ask, "Do I?" and Syd nodded, "Yes."

"Well—see—first 'e said 'e 'adn't been out," continued Harry, "but we knew 'e 'ad, so I said, 'I'll bet you been out arter one o' them assigernations with the pretty parlour-maid,' I said, you know, like one does. In the end 'e 'as to admit 'e went out, but not for no assigernation, and but for all the fuss and—and 'im givin' us a bit o' small change not to say nothin' about it—we'd 'ave thought 'e was jest

settin' traps or something. But then we decided, if it wasn't the maid, it was rabbits——"

"Though, don't forget, 'Arry," interposed Syd, "'e'd been a bit free with 'is cigarettes afore that."

"That's right," agreed Harry. "'E'd been—well, friendly, as you might say."

"Yes, yes, but when did he mention Miss Trent?" asked Jerry impatiently.

"Ah, that was later," replied Harry. "Arter 'e'd come back from the doctor's without 'er, and was 'avin' 'is breakfast before going out again. 'I've got a confession to make,' 'e says—that's what 'e says, wasn't it, Syd?—'I've got a confession. What I went out for last night was thinking I 'eard someone about, and 'oo do you think it was? It was the parlourmaid.'"

"Why hadn't he told you that before?" demanded Jerry.

"I asked 'im, and 'e give a reason."

"Two reasons," corrected Syd.

"That's right. First was that 'e was annoyed with us chippin' 'im like we 'ad. 'I don't go arter galls,' 'e said. Second was becorse 'e didn't want to get 'er into trouble. Not then 'e didn't. 'What was she doing?' we asked. 'Dunno,' 'e said, 'but I'll bet she was up to something. P'r'aps she was 'aving another 'eadache.' 'Well, we won't say nothing,' I said. 'Why not?' 'e said. 'I reckon there's something funny about that girl, and there's no need to keep quiet any more.' And, well, that's why we mentioned it to the boy, sir, but course we none of us knew then anything about the necklace, no more than Charlie did 'imself. All that come arter." He paused. "And that's the lot."

"I see," said Jerry. "And so now you both think that Miss Trent is the thief."

"Well—don't it look like it?" asked Syd.

"Does it? Suppose you were inside a house where there was a necklace you had your eye on—why should you go

out in the grounds to steal it? On the other hand, suppose you were outside the house to begin with—then you'd have to go into the house, wouldn't you? Think that over."

And he turned on his heel and made for the lodge, while Syd and Harry stared after him, and thought it over.

But Charlie Brown was not at the lodge. He was not anywhere. Apparently, he had acted on his word, and walked out.

A sports car drew up with a shriek outside the gate. In the absence of the lodge-keeper, Jerry opened the gate to admit the incongruous vehicle into the grounds. The driver, a light-haired young man, stared at him curiously as the car went by along the drive, and the attractive, brilliantly made-up lady beside the driver stared also.

Jerry had never seen her before, but he was ready to bet a sovereign to a button that she had gold toe-nails.



CHAPTER XXIII

WAC GIVES UP

"I WILL not pretend, Arthur, that this visit does not surprise me," said Lady Cresswell.

"We just *had* to come!" exclaimed Walter Arthur Cresswell, with an enthusiastic tenderness which surprised Lady Cresswell no less than his visit. "Didn't we, Goldie?" The beautiful young lady beside him stopped adoring her highly-polished strangely-hued fingernails for a moment, and nodded hard. "Damn it all, Granny, when there's trouble about, no matter what's happened in the past, blood's thicker than water, what?"

"Well, there certainly is trouble about," agreed Lady Cresswell.

"And so here we are to help you through it," replied Wac. "Bury the past when you're needed's my motto." The theory that her grandson could ever be needed was intriguingly new to Lady Cresswell. "How is he?"

"How is who?"

"Who? Why, Granp!"

"Oh! You know your grandfather is not well?"

"But that's why we're *here*!" answered Wac. "That's why we've *come*! We were in Matlock, and we tootled over at once. Didn't we, Goldie? He's not really bad, I hope?"

He leaned forward in his chair, and Goldie again forgot her lovely nails while they both waited tensely for the response.

"He will recover," said Lady Cresswell.

"Oh, good egg!" almost shouted Wac. Was he over-accentuating the enthusiasm to conceal some inner disappointment? "Good egg indeed! Do you think he'd see

us? Oh, yes, oh, yes," he went on, noting his grandmother's unfavourable expression, "I know our behaviour has been a bit dim, but we've had time to think about it—haven't we, Goldie?"

"We've just *died*," stated Goldie.

She beamed with death.

"We certainly have," nodded Wac, "and what we're longing for now is to put a patch on the old family tyre. You note, don't you, that this time we haven't brought along the old bunch?"

"Old bunch?" repeated Lady Cresswell, distastefully. "Well, that would undoubtedly have been an unusual visitation to a sick chamber."

"What? Yes! Quite so!" The conversation was not going very well. "Er—you've had the doctor, of course?"

"Of course. Dr. Orvil came this morning."

"What did he say?"

"It's just the result of his fall. The shock has confused his mind a little——"

"His mind!" exclaimed Wac. "By Jove! That sounds a bit serious!"

"No, we don't think it's serious."

"But, Grandma, his mind! His *mind*, Goldie!" Wac shook his head gloomily. "Just how has it affected it?"

Lady Cresswell frowned.

"I said his mind was *confused*, Arthur, not *affected*," she pointed out. "All he needs is rest and quiet."

Wac swung round to his wife with a suddenness that made her jump.

"Rest and quiet! Remember that! We must be quiet when he sees us!" he exclaimed. "Perhaps I'd better see him alone first, eh? What do you think?"

"I wouldn't know," replied Goldie.

"Nor does Arthur know," remarked Lady Cresswell, dryly. "I very much doubt whether it would be wise for your

grandfather to see either of you, together *or* singly." Then she turned back to her grandson and looked at him directly. When Lady Cresswell looked at anyone directly it was impossible to evade whatever issue lay behind her steady eyes. "Shall we stop beating about the bush now, Arthur? Why, exactly, have you come?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say."

"But—I've told you!"

"I see. Affection and sympathy. There couldn't possibly be any other reason, could there, Arthur?"

While Wac flushed and floundered, Goldie suddenly took up the challenge.

"Are you suggesting anything?" she snapped. "That sounds a bit wet to me!"

"In the language which I think you understand," responded Lady Cresswell, "I am suggesting a mouthful."

Now Goldie flushed, but she did not flounder. No love had ever been lost between these two diametrically opposite women.

"All right! We *will* stop beating about the bush!" she exclaimed, while Wac looked at her apprehensively. "It's high time—and it's no good your making grimaces at me, Arthur, I know what I'm doing! We're worried about Granp's *mind*—there, that's flat, isn't it?—and we think you ought to be, too! Oh, it didn't all start with that tumble, don't run away with it! Look at the way he's been acting lately, yes, and on our last visit, when he turned us all out! Was *that* the attitude of—of a responsible man?"

"Responsible man?" repeated Lady Cresswell.

Her tone was ominous, but Goldie was wound up, and nothing was going to stop her. If Arthur hedged and hawed, she did not mean to! Weak, that's what Arthur was—weak! She'd known that before she married him. Indeed, had he been stronger, the marriage might never have taken place,

but she did not dwell on that. It was time to face up to things!

"Yes, Lady Cresswell, that's what I said," she retorted. "We're worried, and you can know it! What's going to happen, please tell me, if one day my husband inherits the title without a bean to keep it up?"

"Ah!" murmured Lady Cresswell.

"Old thing——" began Wac, his face now beetroot, but he got no further.

"You be quiet!" Goldie interrupted him. "This is my funeral as well as yours, and I want to know where I stand! Has Arthur been cut out? That's what we want to know! But I'll tell you this! It's perfectly clear that any recent will wouldn't be valid, made by anyone in—in his condition!"

Despite herself, she wavered slightly, and paused.

"Don't stop," said Lady Cresswell, quietly. "I am finding this very interesting."

"Then I'll go on being interesting!" cried Goldie. "You're not forgetting, are you, how I've been insulted in this house! But I don't mind about that, I couldn't care less, it's Arthur I'm thinking of, and look at the ridiculous advertisement Granp put in the papers, dangling a prize for a new staff that would assist him in his latest lunacy! Oh, yes, we've heard all about that! And a nice new staff you've got! They couldn't wait for their prize, could they, but had to go in for theft——!"

She paused again, breathless. If only Lady Cresswell had shouted back, or burst into tears, or had hysterics. Goldie's nerve broke suddenly, and there was a painful silence, during which Wac longed for that very desirable miracle that never occurs in a crisis—the miracle of an opening floor that swallows one up.

"You have heard of the theft, then?" came Lady Cresswell's calm voice at last.

"Yes, we have," muttered Goldie.

"You seem to have a very busy little bird who tells you things," commented Lady Cresswell.

"Oh, we got that from your new butler. He seemed rather upset when he opened the door to us—he thought we were the police."

"I see. And did the new butler also tell you that your grandfather was ill?"

No answer was forthcoming to this inconvenient question.

"But of course not," went on Lady Cresswell. "I think you mentioned, Arthur, that you heard *that* in Matlock?"

"Matlock? Yes, that's right—Matlock!" jerked Arthur.

"And who told you," pressed Lady Cresswell, ruthlessly, "when you were in Matlock? No one here, I am sure, knew you were in Matlock."

"What?"

"Who told you?"

"Er—we heard it over the phone."

"Oh! Someone phoned to you?"

Wac's mind raced round and round, without getting anywhere.

"That proves, Arthur, that you cannot have learned it from this house," said Lady Cresswell, "because now we have no telephone. Well? Well, Arthur? Who was it phoned to you—and from where?"

Wac looked at Goldie helplessly. She merely shrugged, and offered no assistance. Her expression said, "I'm not playing any more—it's your baby now—I'm fed up with you and everything." While he stared at her he was suddenly struck by the abysmal difference between his wife and his grandmother. He threw up his hands.

"What's the use?" he cried. "I give up! You win!"

Lady Cresswell smiled rather acidly.

"Thank you very much, Arthur," she replied, "but I am still quite in the dark. What is it exactly that I have won?"

Goldie jumped to her feet.

"We get nothing in this house but insults!" she exclaimed. "Let's go!"

"Don't be a fool! Sit down!" ordered Lady Cresswell.

Goldie sat down. Wac moistened his dry lips.

"Yes, we'll go," he said, wretchedly, "but not before I've straightened things out! Listen, Grandma—here's the facts, and I can't help how they sound. After that row—and it was pretty sultry, you'll agree—I got the wind up properly." He shot another glance at Goldie. "We both did. And—well—when someone spilt what was happening here and offered to keep an eye on things, we said go ahead. Keep us posted. Dash it all, we were interested, weren't we? Granp had said it was the finish, and if he meant what he said and was really going to cut me out—make a new will p'r'aps—it was reasonable we should like to know, wasn't it? And then, all this—all this new staff business with—you must admit—rather odd goings on—it made us wonder whether Granp *was* quite responsible for all actions——"

"And hope he wasn't, if there was to be a new will?" interposed Lady Cresswell.

"No, let me finish," exclaimed Wac, "because if I once stop I may think better of it! This—little bird, shall we call him?—he certainly gave us the idea that senile decay was setting in—you see, I'm being quite frank about it—and he also implied that this new staff of yours needed watching. Yes, for Granp's sake, as well as ours. 'You'd never get a complete fit-up like this,' he said, 'unless there was some game on and they'd all worked together before. Damn fishy,' he said, 'and if they get under the old man's skin—' I'm telling you what he said, don't forget '—they'll rook him, or influence him, and one day you'll be a baronet without a penny.' He advised us to stay around—that's why we left London for Matlock—and this morning he phoned us the latest news. And so—well," he concluded, lamely, "we came along."

Lady Cresswell waited a few seconds till she was sure he had no more to say, and then observed:

"What surprises me, Arthur, is that the younger generation is supposed to be so clever, and we older ones are supposed to be such fools. Why was this—little bird so interested in your affairs?"

"Eh?"

"Little bird seems rather an apt expression. Did you feather his nest for him?"

"Er—well—naturally one couldn't expect him to use his time for nothing."

"No, naturally not. That is the very last thing I should expect. One must live. But how did he get the information he passed on to you? I am not referring to any information he may have invented. Surely he is not a member of my staff?"

"Oh, no!"

"Then——?"

"He's—er—staying quite close."

"Closer than Matlock, you mean?"

Wac swallowed, and wondered whether, after all, confession was good for the soul.

"Yes, certainly," he murmured.

"How much closer?"

"As a matter of fact—if it is of any importance——"

"How much closer?"

"Quite. He's staying at an inn."

"I only know of one inn anywhere near here," said Lady Cresswell. "Would it be the Red Stag?"

"Yes—that's it."

"But I still do not see, Arthur," pressed Lady Cresswell, distressingly insistent on details, "how anybody staying at the Red Stag could know what is happening at Cresswell Hall? How could he have learned so quickly, for instance, of your grandfather's accident?"


"Well—er—however dim it sounds," gulped Wac, "there is one member of your staff he's in touch with—but perhaps there's no need——"

"Arthur!" said Lady Cresswell, sharply. "Last night, as you know, a pearl necklace was stolen from this house, and my parlourmaid is suspected of the theft. I insist on being told immediately who this person is!"

The sharpness of her tone, even more than the reasonableness of her request, gave the unhappy Wac no alternative.

"The lodge-keeper," he answered.

This was not Wac's lucky day, for the next thing that happened was as disconcerting as it was unexpected. The sound of racing feet receded from the drawing-room door across the hall, the front door slammed, and from outside came the raucous commotion of a violently-started engine. Wac ran to the window, and was just in time to see his sports car swing round the drive and speeding towards the lodge gate. It was being driven by the young man he had passed on entering the grounds.



CHAPTER XXIV

AT THE RED STAG

IT WAS not Jerry's habit to listen at doors, but on this very crowded morning he fell to the temptation, and perhaps only the hundred per cent moralist will blame him.

Returning from his unsuccessful endeavour to find Charlie Brown, alias Green, he had paused for a few moments to gaze at Wac's bright red sports car standing outside the front porch. Designed for noise and speed, it looked as unnatural in motionless condition as the Niagara Falls would have looked had they suddenly ceased to flow. But this is our thought, not Jerry's. His thought was concerned with the new problem of these unexpected visitors.

Inside the house he encountered Smith, and questioned him.

"Yes, I let 'em in," said Smith, "and a nice shock they give me—the way they knocked I thought they was the police! *And* I took the liberty of telling 'em so—there's no need for ordinary callers to wake the dead! Couple of those bright young things, and no mistake!"

"Perhaps, but don't forget you're a butler," Jerry reminded him. "How did they take it?"

Showing no repentance, Smith replied, "The lady flared up like a firework, so I took the liberty of pointing out that there was illness in the house, not to mention trouble about a stolen necklace——"

"You seem to have taken quite a lot of liberty, Smith," interrupted Jerry, frowning. "Where are they now?"

"In the drawing-room, having a pow-wow with my lady. Mrs. Clover's up with the old man till they go."

Jerry nodded, and wandered up to the first floor, cogitating on his next step. Were the visitors going to introduce some fresh complication? As he reached the top of the flight Sir Walter's door opened, and Lucy came out.

"Is that you, Jerry?" she called, softly. "I wonder whether you'd tell Lady Cresswell that Sir Walter is awake?"

"Is he asking for her?" enquired Jerry.

"No, but I think she might like to know. He wants to get up!"

"O.K. She's engaged with her visitors at the moment, but I'll barge in, if you like."

Lucy went back into the room while Jerry returned down the stairs. Approaching the drawing-room door, he heard raised voices. He paused. His interest tightened and his heart accelerated. He forgot all about Sir Walter as he drew closer to the door and listened, and when the vital information he was overhearing reached its climax, he followed an irrepressible impulse and dashed out of the house.

And there, loathing its inactivity, was the bright red sports car.

When he reached the gate—Syd opened it for him, with a mouth almost as wide as the aperture through which Jerry passed—the enormity of his action did occur to him. But he didn't care. Only one thing mattered in the world, in the whole firmament, in Eternity itself. It was to get in the shortest possible time to the Red Stag.

For he was convinced it was to the Red Stag that Charlie had flown, and there was small doubt that the "little bird" would be found there, also—unless the bird itself had flown! Who the bird was Jerry had no idea, and he had a burning desire to find out.

He had never been to the Red Stag, but a youth with a straw in his mouth directed him to the turning. Caution caused him to leave the noisy car a short distance before

reaching the inn. He did not want his arrival proclaimed in advance. The innkeeper stood in the doorway. He was a flabby, weak-looking man, and his expression was worried.

"I'm afraid we're full up," he said.

"That's good news," retorted Jerry, "but you'll have to stand one more."

The innkeeper eyed the newcomer apprehensively, and decided that he looked aggressive. Life was really becoming very difficult.

"What's that mean?" he enquired, guardedly. And then suddenly added, "What's this all *about*?"

"Did you recently nearly engage a man named Charlie Green?" asked Jerry.

"Charlie Green? Never heard of him," answered the innkeeper.

"Perhaps you know him under another name. Smallish man. Sandy hair. Wears leggings."

It was obvious that the description registered.

"What about him?" said the innkeeper.

"A hell of a lot about him!" replied Jerry. "Is he here?"

The innkeeper twisted his head round and glanced towards a staircase behind him.

"What right have you to ask who's here and who isn't?" he demanded.

"I'll tell you!" returned Jerry. "A valuable necklace has been stolen from Cresswell Hall, and this man was the new lodge-keeper there and he's done a bunk. And I've reason to believe that someone else has been staying here, too, who the police will soon be after. Is that enough to go on with? If you're reasonable, maybe it will save you a lot of trouble later on."

The innkeeper was impressed.

"Well, what do you want me to do?" he asked, mildly.

"Is that fellow anywhere about?"

"There's one like who you described upstairs, but I never engaged him."

"Just arrived here?"

"Keeps on arriving! Last time was a few minutes ago."

"Who's he gone up to see?"

"Someone who's staying here."

"What name?"

"Tilling. Mr. and Mrs. Tilling. Leastways, that's what they wrote in the book."

This was a pity. A woman might make things more difficult. But there was no turning back now. Jerry was going upstairs if he had to wade through a brood of Tillings! Still, it might be as well to make sure there were no more.

"Is that the lot? Just those three?"

"You won't find three up there, only two. Mrs. Tilling went off an hour ago—and I didn't cry, neither! Glad enough to see the back of the lot of 'em!"

"Don't worry, you will," answered Jerry, relieved. He was glad to escape Mrs. Tilling. Still, even the two who remained might prove tough customers. "Well, I'm going up now—and you might hang around in case there's trouble."

"Trouble——?"

"I hope not. Which room is it? How'll I find it?"

The innkeeper looked alarmed. "I don't like this!" he muttered. "I don't like it at all—not that anybody's got anything on me—I can't be held responsible for——"

"I'm in a hurry!" interrupted Jerry, impatiently.

"Oh! The room. Top of the second flight. No. 6."

"Thank you."

Jerry ran in, and the innkeeper turned and watched him run up the stairs with a gloomy expression. He'd never been

happy about these people, no, it was a fact, he hadn't, but they paid their bills, and when people paid their bills. . . .

Jerry had acted throughout on impulse, and he arrived at the top of the second flight without a plan. He realised, too late, that he ought to have brought someone along with him. Smith or O'Hara, or both. Well, he hadn't, so that was that, and here was the door of No. 6, facing him. Should he burst in upon them? And then what? While he was hesitating, he heard voices, and to his astonishment he recognised those of both speakers. One was Charlie. The other—the alleged Mr. Tilling—was Mr. Edward P. Bloggs! And Mr. Bloggs was saying:

"You've acted like a fool!"

Charlie's voice responded:

"That's right! Blame me! But come to that, what about you? You'll never get nothing more out of that grandson—I never 'ad no belief in that side of it from the start—but 'ere I bring along something really worth a bit, and all you do is to swear!"

"I'm not swearing at what you've brought——"

"Then what?"

"It's how you've acted since! Clearing out like this, and getting yourself suspected——"

"Not a bit of it," interrupted Charlie, but his voice was not very confident. "I gave a good reason for leaving—think I'm a mug? They suspect the girl, and by the time that's tidied up I'll 'ave cleared out a damn sight further! Yus, and I don't want to waste no time about it. You can get rid of stuff! I can't! So 'ere's yer chance to make a bargain fer ready cash. I know you've plenty, so don't act poor! Pass over fifty quid, and you can 'ave what's worth fifty times more, and you've seen the last of me. Stop starin' at me like a blinkin' hoctopus! I want to go! I'm for 'oppin' it, like my sister's done. If she thought 'er game was gettin'

too 'ot, mine's a bloody sight 'otter. I don't want to be in Derbyshire when they find that parlourmaid. Fifty, that's all I'm askin', but I want it quick!"

"Where is the girl?"

"I shouldn't go and see 'er!"

Bloggs gave a short laugh.

"That's why I want to know where you left her—so I can take another direction!"

"Bah, the way you waste time! She went over at the top of Dipper's Lane. The fence is a bit broke jest there, so it's silly to stand near the edge and look at the view! And if she's finished, 'oo's ter know that wasn't what she done? Gawd! What's that?"

It was Jerry, racing down two flights of stairs in the time it normally takes to go down one. He nearly knocked down the innkeeper at the bottom.

"Where's Dipper's Lane?" he shouted.

"What? Where?" gasped the innkeeper.

"Dipper's Lane, man! Quick, for God's sake! And keep those two blackguards here till I send the police—one of them may be wanted for murder!"

The innkeeper remained steady enough to give directions, but after his meteoric visitor had shot out into the road, his knees gave way beneath him, and he sat down with extreme suddenness on the bottom stair.

Wac's sports car had performed many violent feats, but it had never performed one more violent than its journey from the Red Stag to the top of Dipper's Lane. Only a miracle saved the journey from being its last, for it stopped with a screeching jerk six inches from the broken fence. Jerry leapt out, and stood on the edge. His forehead was damp as he stared down into the valley with its fast-flowing stream. Half-way down the slope, on a narrow ledge, he saw a motionless figure. He let himself over the edge, felt sick, breathed a prayer, and slid down.

Madeleine's eyes were open when he reached her. She stared at him dizzily and incredulously.

"I—don't think—I believe it," she said.

"Oh, my God, you're not dead!" he gasped.

"You'd better watch me, darling," she answered. "I'm going to faint."



CHAPTER XXV

CLEAN-UP

WHEN WE were last in the long-windowed, blue-curtained drawing-room of Cresswell Hall it contained three people, excluding our invisible selves. Now it contained five. To Lady Cresswell and her grandson and Goldie were added Jerry Haines and Madeleine Trent.

Lady Cresswell had returned from a long and rather difficult session in Sir Walter's bedroom, where she had at last persuaded that fast-recovering and obstinate octogenarian to remain in bed a little longer, no matter how much better he might be feeling. Wac and Goldie had returned from an unsuccessful chase of their red sports car, and a subsequent wrangle about themselves, their situation, their future, and life generally in the grounds. And Madeleine had been carried to the drawing-room in Jerry's arms and gently deposited on the satin damask-covered couch.

Jerry had finished his story of his visit to the inn, having prefaced it with an apology for the loan of Wac's car—"There it was, and I took it, and I wasn't going to stop to ask!"—and Madeleine had described how, after being shoved over the edge by Charlie for reasons of which she was then entirely ignorant—"When he asked me to get out of the carriage I really thought something was wrong with the horse's shoe"—she had lost consciousness, coming to at last to find herself on a ledge with an injured ankle—an ankle now bandaged.

Her faint cries had not been heard. Either no one had passed along the lonely lane above her to hear them, or she had been too far below for her voice, weakened by her condition, to carry up above the sound of the torrent. Her

situation had seemed quite hopeless until the miracle of Jerry's arrival. But the greatest miracle, she added, was how he had managed to carry her up to the car.

"How *did* you do it, Jerry?" she asked.

"I've no idea," he answered. "I suppose just because it had to be done."

"You got no help from me!"

"No," explained Jerry, with a smile. "The shock of seeing me had sent her off again!"

"What a swine!" cried Wac, dwelling with a certain pleasure on someone whose actions were worse than his own. "Wanted to stop her returning, eh, so she'd be thought the thief!"

"It was more than that, I expect," said Madeleine. "He believed I knew he'd been out in the grounds last night."

"Oh, did he?"

"Yes. But of course I didn't know—then—that anything had been stolen."

A short silence ensued. Thoughts were busy. It was Lady Cresswell who, after hesitation, voiced the thoughts. She spoke quietly, as though performing an unpleasant but necessary duty.

"*Did* you know he had been out in the grounds?" she asked.

"I—I thought he had," stammered Madeleine.

"May we know why?"

"Does that matter?"

Jerry, like the others, had been puzzled, but sensing her unwillingness to satisfy curiosity he broke in:

"All that matters is that we've got you safely back again!"

"Seems to me there's something else that matters," remarked Wac. "Those scoundrels have got away with the goods, what?"

From a distance came a sound that was now becoming familiar on the drive.

"I wonder?" said Jerry.

"Good God, isn't that my car again?" suddenly gasped Wac.

"I hope so," answered Jerry. "I'm afraid we borrowed it a second time—for an attacking party to the inn!"

"Gracious!" murmured Lady Cresswell, astonished at the way she was standing it.

The car drew up with its well-known shriek, and perhaps it had some excuse for its vocal protest this time, since it was heavily overloaded. A few moments later the drawing-room door opened, and the returned army burst in. It comprised O'Hara, Smith, Fingleton, and Tonsil, all looking very warm. And behind them was the cheering crowd. This comprised Jane.

"Forgive the intrusion!" cried O'Hara. "But we're a bit above ourselves, begorrah! And we've brought along some news!"

"I hope it is good news," replied Lady Cresswell.

"'Tis the best ever!" answered O'Hara. He turned to Wac. "And 'tis your car we have to thank for it, sir, for in anything slower we'd not have arrived in time. But do ye know where we've been?"

"I've just told them," said Jerry. "What did you find when you got there?"

"We found the prettiest fight I've seen for a month o' Sundays," responded O'Hara, "though the odds were unfair. Two to one, it was, and so when the one got knocked out, we kept the same proportion by turnin' it into four to two!"

Fingleton cleared his throat.

"I think, perhaps," he suggested, "the matter could be explained a little more clearly."

"You've said it," agreed Smith. "We come along just as the innkeeper was taking the count——"

"Stout fellow!" exclaimed Jerry. "Then he really tried to stop them getting away?"

"He put up a good show, sir. Lucky we turned up when we did. But ours was more what you might call a running fight, 'cos we must have chased them two rascals a hundred yards or more. I thought office boys could run, not to mention Irishmen, but it was Mr. Fingleton first caught 'em up, and the way he lep' on Bloggs's back, it was a treat to see! And over they went, and Bloggs flings out his hands to catch hold o' something to save him, and what he catches hold of is Charlie's legs."

"They was like a lot o' kickin' crabs when we got to 'em," panted Tonsil.

The memory had made him breathless again.

"I thought *I* was tellin' this story," mentioned O'Hara.

"Well, sir, you can finish it," grinned Smith, "and you've got the best bits coming!"

O'Hara looked round the drawing-room, as though missing something.

"Yes, but Lucy ought to be hearin' this bit," he said. "Where is she?"

Lady Cresswell answered, "She is in Sir Walter's room—someone has to be with him to keep him in bed!—so she will have to hear it afterwards. What is this best bit, Mr. O'Hara? I think it will have to be particularly good to improve on what we have already heard!"

"The best bit," said O'Hara, "was a small, insignificant-lookin' fellow called George Gem——"

"Good Lord! You don't mean——?" exclaimed Jerry.

"'Twas George Gem," nodded O'Hara, "and in case ye don't know who that is, Lady Cresswell, he's a private detective engaged by Mrs. Clover to catch our old friend Bloggs! And if it's a long time about it the detective was, who'll be blamin' him for that? For while he was shadowin' Bloggs back to

London—seems Bloggs has been to London and back, though don't be askin' me why——”

Wac coloured slightly, and glanced covertly at Goldie, but he received no response, for Goldie's policy had been to say nothing and to hear everything, and to look unutterably bored.

“—during the journey Bloggs led the 'tec into a blind alley, and nearly murdered him. Mr. Gem took a worse knock than Sir Walter, I'm thinkin' and has been longer gettin' over it, but he laid his information as soon as he could, and began searchin' in all the most likely places. One of these was the Red Stag, and he turned up there with a sergeant and two constables while we were sittin' on the man he wanted.” He gave a short laugh. “We threw in Charlie as an extra!”

“Well, it all sounds very satisfactory,” remarked Lady Cresswell, after a short pause. “But—what about the necklace?”

“Ah, 'twas a shame, that was!” replied O'Hara.

“You mean it wasn't found?”

“Oh, sure, it was found, in one of their pockets, I don't remember which. But—will ye believe it?—when we wanted to bring it back to ye, as the crown of our achievements, oh, no! the police wouldn't let us have it! They said they'd be doin' that themselves, thank you, afther leavin' Bloggs and Charlie at the station. Isn't that like them, now—us doin' all the work and them gettin' all the glory?”

“But, of course—strictly speaking—they were perfectly right,” said Fingleton. “One has to admit that. While they had every reason to believe that we should faithfully have returned the necklace to its owner, the matter had now—I take it—become their responsibility, and—er—from the official point of view they could not allow themselves to—so to speak—indulge in any sort of risk.”

“Wot 'e means is, we might of been bogus,” explained Tonsil.

"Er—well—in a manner of speaking, yes," answered Fingleton.

"But come to that," Tonsil pointed out, "'ow do we know *they* weren't bogus?"

The front door bell rang, and Jane jumped up.

"Well, here they are, me lad," said O'Hara, glancing towards the window. "You can go and ask them."

CHAPTER XXVI

GATHERING THE THREADS

MADELEINE lay on her bed, watching the evening sunlight trace its last rays upon the flowered wallpaper across the little room.

It had been a strange, exciting day, beginning with the near-extinction of her life, and ending with the prospect of a future which, though still indecipherable—and was not that one of its chief charms?—seemed to be growing richer and fuller. After having received many visitors in her room, Jane having made the inevitable comment that she must be feeling like a film star, it was pleasant to enjoy this period of complete solitude with its luxury of thinking.

The visitors, besides offering undeserved sympathy, for in spite of her injured foot Madeleine had never felt happier, had kept her in touch with the trend of events. She had heard of the various charges against the captured enemy—charges not merely of bogus company promotion, obtaining money under false pretences, and theft, but of assault and attempted murder. She had heard, stoically, George Gem's lugubrious opinion that apart from the satisfaction of knowing the guilty punished, members of the late and unlamented Spare Parts Limited would not be likely to regain more than, at the most optimistic estimate, twopence in the pound. "For you can't get blood out of a stone," Gem had observed, "or cash out of an empty pocket." She had heard—this from Fingleton, who had rather bashfully paid his respects, forgetting to remove his green apron—that Lady Cresswell had approved a suggestion for a new flower-bed, and that the two under-gardeners were at that very moment digging it with an enthusiasm which, indeed, Miss Trent, augured

well for the future; and the number of cigarette-ends about the grounds was notably on the decrease. She had heard from Dr. Orvil, who had called an hour previously, that Sir Walter was better, and that her own injury would right itself after a few days rest; and from Lady Cresswell that, the faster Sir Walter improved, the more difficult it was to keep him in bed.

But it was a talk with Jerry Haines that stayed most persistently in her mind, and she recalled it happily as she watched the sunlight playing across the wallpaper. It had occurred after tea, prior to the doctor's visit, and it had begun on an impersonal note.

"Well, how's things?" she had asked. "Find a chair, Jerry. Any more excitements downstairs, or are we all growing calmer?"

"The storm's subsiding," answered Jerry. "May one smoke?"

"No—two may."

When the cigarettes were lit and two thin streaks coiled ceilingwards, he went on:

"Yes, we're getting back to normal—that is, if the queer sort of life we've been living here can be called normal——"

"I call it normal," she interrupted him.

"I've no quarrel with it, either," he smiled, "but whatever we call it, we're getting back to it, and once you're on your feet again it will be 'routine as usual.'"

"Will it?"

"Why not?"

"I was just wondering. Are the future baronet and his gilded wife still here?"

"Oh, I see! The last flies in the ointment, eh? Well, the future baronet's still here, but not the gilded wife. Didn't you hear her driving away in the sports car, or are you too high up?"

"You don't mean she's left him?" exclaimed Madeleine.

Jerry grinned.

"It's a bit early to be as optimistic as all that," he said, "but I believe they've had the hell of a row——"

"Language, *please!*"

"Beg pardon! What about a jolly old fuss?"

"We pass that."

"Nevertheless, Madeleine, I'm quite sure our grandfathers used the word hell when they wanted to—though not perhaps before ladies."

"Don't let's discuss history," said Madeleine. "Get back to the jolly old fuss. What was it about?"

"Well, I seem to have listened at plenty of doors today," he replied, "but it's not a chronic habit. Still, others are less scrupulous and rumours *are* floating about, so the betting is that the fuss was based on a difference of view regarding future policy. Wac—who I can't help liking somehow or other—he's become the hundred per cent penitent, and I've a sort of feeling it's genuine—nothing to do with finance this time."

"You mean, he's not turned good because it's the only way left to what he wants?"

Jerry nodded. "That's what I mean. Lady Cresswell took him in to see his grandad. I don't know what happened, but he came out looking almost human, and shortly afterwards occurred the row, in which one report states Goldie called him a weak-kneed coward, adding that if he wanted to spend his life in chains he needn't think *she* was going to remain chained to *him*——"

"Authentic report?"

"Jane. And off she went. Wac's staying the night."

"Another one to wash up for!" remarked Madeleine. "Aren't I lucky, being *hors de combat*?"

"Yes, smart work," laughed Jerry, but suddenly stopped in the middle of it. "My God, Madeleine! Yes, you were lucky! When I think——"

"You were my luck, Jerry," she interposed, "only don't *let's* think of it! I don't want to get all serious and weepy. Well, what else? Anything more to tell me?"

He took her hand and patted it, and both knew how hard he found it to let it go.

"Anything else? Yes. Over tea we went into conference," he said.

"What about?" she asked.

"Ourselves. I don't quite know how it started, but we seemed to have reached a sort of point when we wanted to know how we all felt about things."

"What things?"

"Cresswell Hall. Being here."

"I see. A kind of review of the position."

"You've got it. You see—yes, now I remember, it was Tim who started it. He said we ought to watch how the situation was developing, not only for our own sakes but for Sir Walter and Lady Cresswell's. What happens when the month's up? Do we stay on, or do we leave 'em cold? We jumped into this without much thought, but now—Tim said—it was time we did a bit of thinking. . . . Foot hurting?"

"No."

"Then what's up?"

"Nothing. I was just doing a bit of thinking myself. What did you all decide?"

"Well—of course—it was a personal matter with each of us," answered Jerry. "We had a sort of a whip round of opinions. Fingleton spoke first. He almost wept at the idea of leaving. 'This is all I want,' he said, 'and as long as I give my lady satisfaction, I'll stay.' Then Bob piped up. He thought it a fair treat, yes, he did, and if he sent half his pay each week to his mother there shouldn't be any difficulty. Smith came next. You know, I think Smith really fits his part better than any of us. Especially in those siders! I believe he's going to try and grow genuine ones!"

"What did he say?"

"This would do me fer keeps, fact it would, if I had Lil along," quoted Jerry. "Lil's his sister. And he added, imagining he was subtle, that Lil was a grand cook."

"Oh! He said that, did he?" exclaimed Madeleine.

"He did."

"And——" She paused. "How did Tim react?"

"Tim said—it was quite an idea."

Neither spoke for a few seconds. Jerry watched Madeleine thoughtfully while she fixed her eyes on the end of the bed.

"What else did Tim say?" she asked, breaking the little silence. "Please try and remember exactly, if you can. You've remembered the rest."

"I'll do my best," replied Jerry, "though Tim's speech was a spot longer, and you must excuse me the accent. . . . He said, 'Well, folks, you'll remember 'twas I first fell in love with this place, and I'm not giving my job to Lil or anyone else before I've had my share of it. But 'tis a rolling stone I am, and maybe I'll start rolling again before very long.'"

Jerry did not mention that he had caught O'Hara looking at him while he said it.

"You mean, Tim won't be staying?" murmured Madeleine.

"He didn't sound as permanent as the other three," answered Jerry. "He'll be missed when he goes."

"Terribly."

Jerry shot a quick glance at her. She was still gazing at the end of the bed.

"And Lucy?" asked Madeleine.

"Lucy said to me, 'You've seen the size of my flat in London, Jerry, and you heard what Mr. Gem said about my chances of getting my two thousand pounds back. I'm staying at Cresswell Hall—two thousand pounds or not—as long as Lady Cresswell wants me to.'"

Madeleine smiled. "I'm glad she feels that way. And now *you*, Jerry!"

"Yes."

"What did you say?"

"I said I hadn't made up my mind."

"You mean, you don't know yet?"

"That's just what I mean, Madeleine. I don't know yet."

Now she turned her head and looked at him. His expression was as solemn as his voice.

"When—will you know?"

He found her eyes too disconcerting, and turned his own away. Staring at the carpet, he responded:

"I didn't know whether to take that job with Spare Parts Limited. I made up my mind when I found that you were going to be there, too. It's the same case here at Cresswell Hall, Madeleine. Nothing like being frank, is there? So, please, what are *you* going to do?"

Her voice was not quite steady as she answered:

"I'm staying here, Jerry. I just *couldn't* leave—though I don't really want to be a parlourmaid all my life!"

The next moment, appalled at herself, she turned scarlet. But Jerry only laughed. . . .

She was remembering that laughter, and the happiness of it, when a soft knock sounded on her door. The evening sunlight was fading from the flowered wallpaper as she turned her head and called, "Come in." Her heart began beating faster, but it was not Jerry who entered this time. It was a very old man, leaning on a thick stick.

"Well! You don't look dead!" said Sir Walter.

"Nor do you!" exclaimed Madeleine, quickly readjusting her mind. "But—should you be up?"

"No, this is very naughty of me," grinned Sir Walter, "but then children are proverbially naughty, eh, and as everybody knows I am in my second childhood. May I sit

down for a few moments? Thank you. I want to talk to you."

He hobbled to the chair by her bed, and lowered himself into it cautiously. The effort postponed further speech for a while, and he gazed balefully at his right foot, ready to descend upon it if it misbehaved. But it did not misbehave, and gradually his expression relaxed. He gave a little contented sigh, and raised his eyes to his parlourmaid.

"It is quite interesting, being old," he remarked. "All sorts of surprising things happen to you. Of course, occasionally one gets a little impatient or annoyed, but that passes, that passes. Yes, and instead of having to go and find adventure, it comes to your very door—before the big adventure, eh? It was quite an adventure, for instance, to come up these stairs. I have not been up them—or in this room—for a long while." His eyes wandered round. "At one time, I remember, we used it as a store room. Yes, a store room." His eyes rested on the little cupboard behind the washstand. "Yes—I remember. But I have not come to talk to you about that."

"Please don't tire yourself, Sir Walter," begged Madeleine, anxiously. He looked so very frail.

"I am not in the least tired!" he retorted. "I am very comfortable." Suddenly he fixed his gaze upon her. "I am picking up the threads, but I have not yet gathered them all. Has my wife mentioned to you that we had a daughter Ursula?"

"Yes—today," answered Madeleine.

"Ah, she did! And that the necklace that was stolen was her—Ursula's—necklace, and was stolen from her room?"

Madeleine nodded.

A new thought flashed into Sir Walter's head as he was about to continue. "It was not the thief's first job, evidently—I hear a set of skeleton keys was found on him. But as we have the necklace back we need not worry about that. . . .

And you know, of course, that last night I had a little accident which—which put my mind in a—h'm—a little temporary confusion—eh? I expect you have been told of that accident?"

"Yes, Sir Walter," replied Madeleine. "You were looking for the thief——"

"Was I?" blinked the baronet. "*Was I?*" Now he was looking at her very hard indeed. "That is—quite naturally—what everybody thought. But I was looking for someone very different. I knew nothing of any burglar. I was looking for Ursula!"

Madeleine's heart jumped.

"Ursula?" she repeated, stupidly.

"Yes, Ursula," nodded the old man.

"But—I thought——"

"She was dead? Death is a mere transition. But—until last night, going to my window because something had awakened me—I did not believe that the transition had a visible form. Last night, from my window, I saw Ursula. She was walking in the moonlight through the lavender path. She was wearing a crinoline dress of her mother's. . . . Of course, I could not see her very clearly, but Ursula had dark hair, not unlike yours." He paused, while Madeleine's heart raced. "And then, after my accident, when I was back in my room, I saw her from my window again for a moment." He leaned forward a little. "I thought, perhaps, you could help me to explain it?"

A silence of only a few seconds seemed interminable. History repeated itself in Madeleine's mind as she watched herself following her fantastic, irrepressible impulse—leaving her bed to gaze from her window at the perfect moonlit scene—longing to be out there, a part of it all—flying suddenly to the little cupboard behind the washstand and bringing out the crinoline dress—putting it on, and slipping down the stairs to the front door—leaving the door ajar for her return. For a timeless period she had wandered in the magic grounds,

joining the ghosts of the past, living a dream. Then, when she had returned, she had found the front door closed, and had vaguely seen a figure hurrying away along the drive. But a back window was open, and spurred by panic, encumbered though she was by her clothes, she had re-entered the house by the window—the window through which the thief had made his own entry before choosing the open front door for his subsequent desperate exit. Breathlessly she had sped by the back stairs to her room. Something was afoot, she did not know what, but she was too scared and ashamed to admit her part in it, and by the time Jane peered into her room she was back in bed and feigning sleep.

It had been because of her confused mind, still entangled in the glamorous web of her moonlight escapade, that she had wanted to get away from questions and from everybody in the morning, and had volunteered to accompany the thief himself to Dr. Orvil's house!

How could she explain all this? It was known that she had seen the thief in the grounds, but until now—in consideration, no doubt, of her condition—she had not been pressed, and Lady Cresswell had not reverted to the question which Jerry had turned aside. Now there was no escape. And she could not explain it. She could only admit it.

"I'm sorry," she said, at last. "It was me. The dress—I found it in the cupboard."

"And the moonlight did the rest?" smiled Sir Walter.

"Aren't you—angry?"

"Why should I be—when it is just what Ursula might have done herself? No, of course I am not angry. I think I would find it difficult, my dear, to be angry—really angry, you know—at anything you did. You are quite the best parlourmaid we have ever had, although my wife tells me she thinks you would make an even better companion-secretary—if you decide to stay. Er—by the way, do you think you will be staying?"

"Oh, yes!" she cried. "All of us!"

"Really? That is good news," said Sir Walter. "Then we can talk about any rearrangements later. You may recall," he added, with an odd little smile, "that our advertisement implied that a satisfactory staff would have good prospects. You can be sure we will look after you all. Now I think I had better go. No, I see you have a question?"

For an octogenarian with a bump on his head, Sir Walter was surprisingly shrewd. He had read Madeleine's expression correctly, for a question had suddenly shot into her mind.

"I'm not sure that I ought to ask it," she said.

"Take the risk," suggested Sir Walter. "You took one last night!"

"It's impertinent. I'm not certain why I want to know—but it would be ghastly if you thought any of us were gold-diggers. You're—you're going to look after your grandson, too?"

"I have been very angry with my grandson," answered Sir Walter, "but of course I shall look after him. But if that most horrible young woman he's married—and she is a gold-digger!—if she gets another impression and decides to dig for her gold elsewhere—well, perhaps that will not be such a bad thing for the future of Cresswell Hall."

He began to chuckle, then shouted, "AH!" and seized his toe.



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